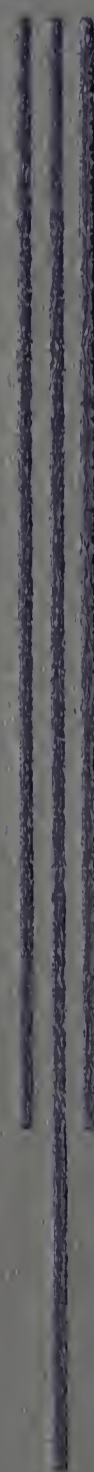


NATALIE



ENID JOHNSON

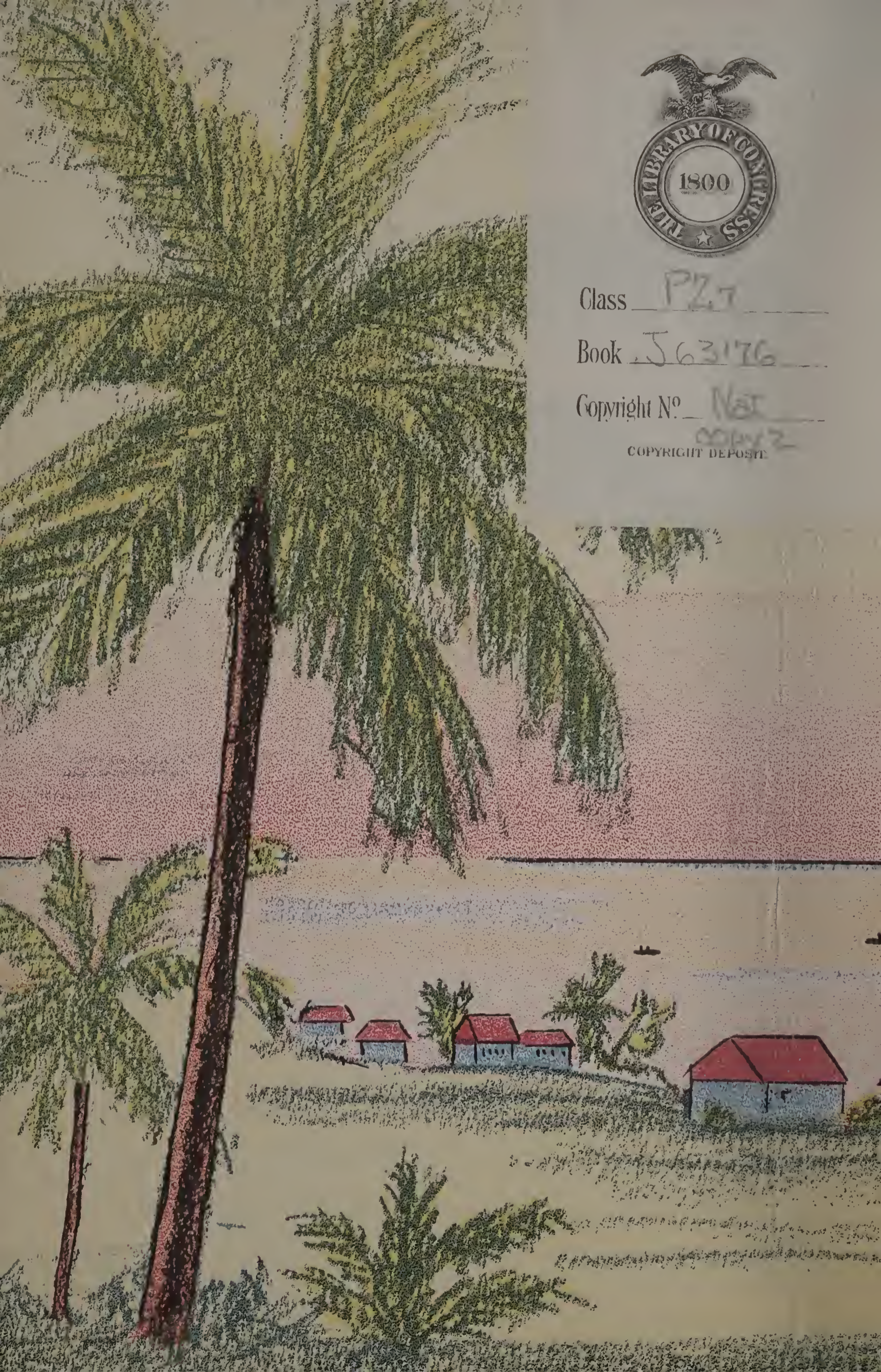


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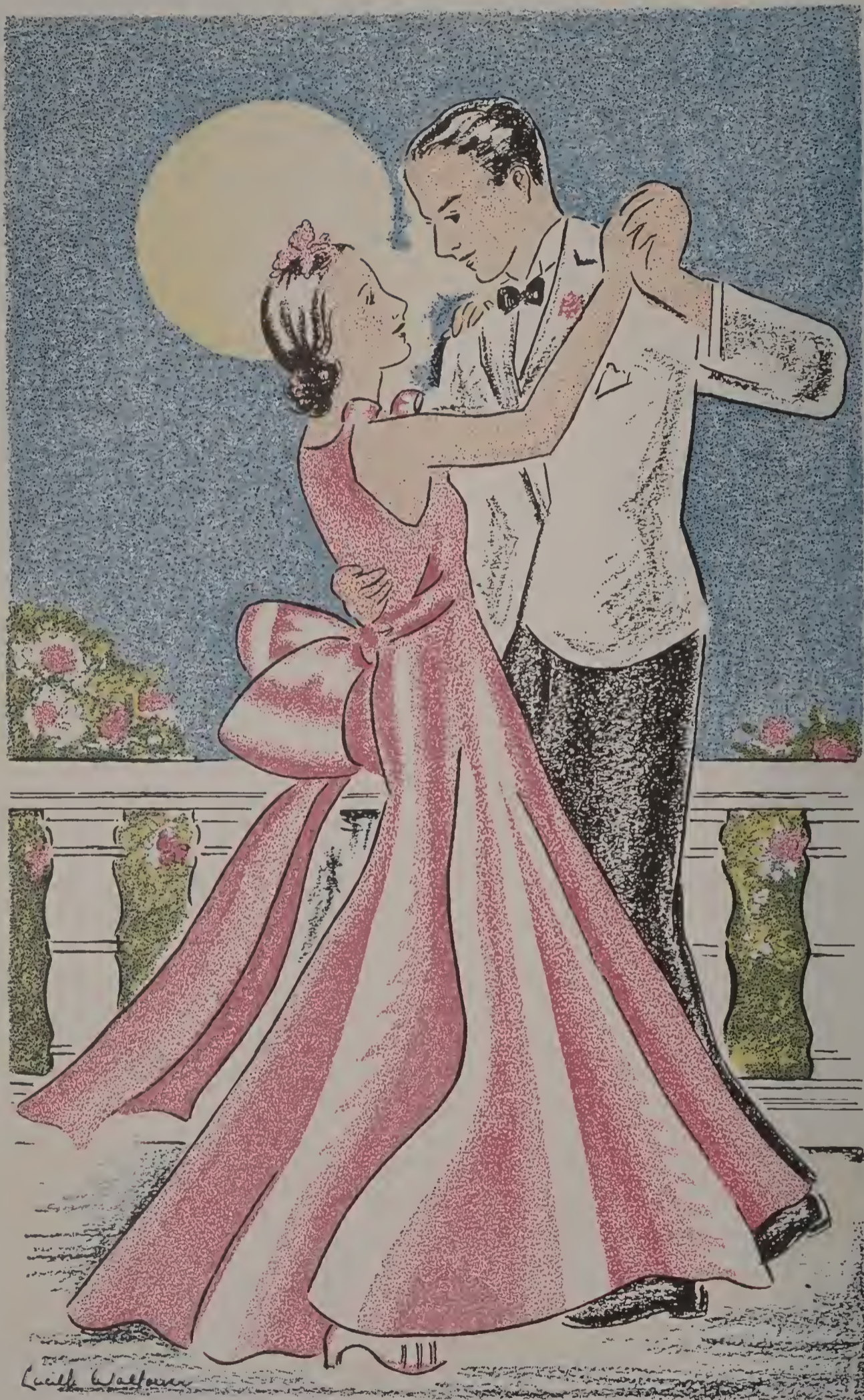
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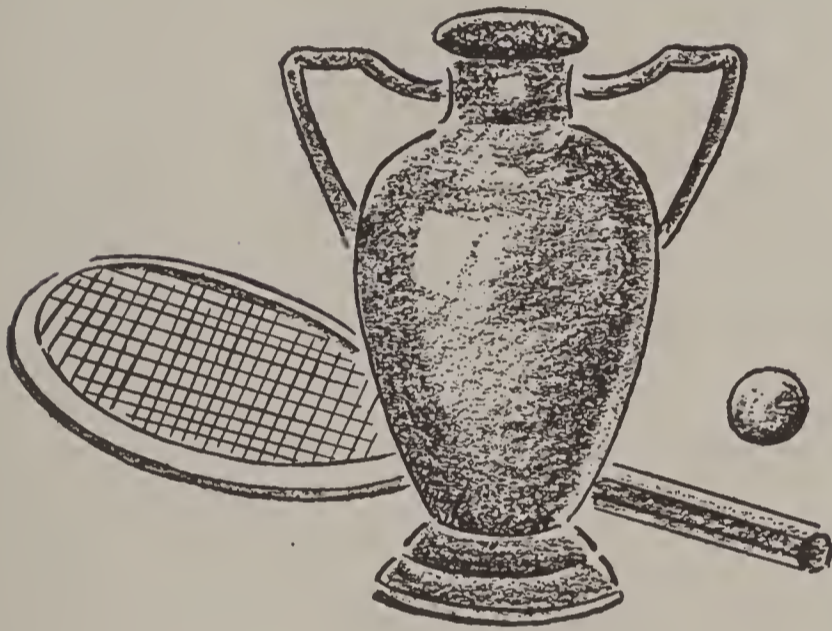




"What a break for me," said Dick

NATALIE

By
ENID JOHNSON



Pictures by
LUCILLE WALLOWER

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To
A. J.
Who Knows Why



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| The Wreck of the Bobolink..... | 17 |
| Confidences | 26 |
| The First Guest..... | 41 |
| Minnie Mis-hap to the Rescue..... | 51 |
| Uncle Bill | 63 |
| Ward Deliverance | 73 |
| First Steps | 89 |
| The Party | 105 |
| Tourists Accommodated | 119 |
| The Plain Unvarnished Truth..... | 124 |
| When Dreams Come True..... | 156 |
| For to Admire and to See..... | 181 |
| Through the Big Ditch..... | 194 |
| The Three-Ringed Circus..... | 206 |
| Golden Days in Panama..... | 225 |
| Special Messenger | 244 |
| Family of Four..... | 257 |
| Commencement | 268 |

FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

COLOR PLATES

| | Page |
|---|------|
| “What a break for me,” said Dick..... | 7 |
| Natalie always returned with many sketches..... | 16 |

BLACK AND WHITE PLATES

| | Page |
|--|------|
| “I think these show real talent”..... | 33 |
| “The doctor says you maybe won’t ever walk”.... | 47 |
| It was the loveliest Christmas she had ever spent.. | 83 |
| “Now she’s a cripple, she goes to a dance!”..... | 113 |
| “Why, Cuz-zen Dick!” cried Natalie..... | 133 |
| “Just look at yourself, Mr. Bossy Frost”..... | 147 |
| “It’s fairyland!” cried Natalie..... | 177 |
| The <i>carimetta</i> jogged along a beautiful avenue.... | 213 |
| A prettier wedding was never seen..... | 265 |
| “We are proud of you, Natalie”..... | 283 |



Natalie always returned with many sketches



NATALIE

Chapter I

THE WRECK OF THE BOBOLINK

HI, NATS!" the voice of Teddy Davis cut through the warm spring air. Natalie turned her head toward the window. The shades were drawn, but she could see a flicker of sunlight playing along the sill.

"That's Teddy," she thought. "They haven't told him. Maybe I am not hurt as badly as I thought I was if they haven't told Teddy." She tried to lift herself on her elbow to call a greeting to Teddy, but the effort sent a sharp pain along her back, and she settled quickly against the pillow. A little moan escaped her tight-shut lips.

Instantly a white-clad figure was standing beside her bed and a strange voice said, "What is it, dear?"

"Who are you?" It was hard to speak, almost more effort than was worth while. But she did want to know who belonged to the face bending over her.

"I'm your nurse," was the answer. "My name is Leonora Hart, but most people call me Miss Lee."

"Natalie," the voice of Teddy sounded more insistent this time. And instantly came another voice, warning, almost scolding. It was her aunt's voice.

"Hush, Teddy. Please go away. Natalie is sick!"

Through the open window Teddy's voice came very clearly. "Isn't she all right *yet*?" he demanded.

"No, Teddy. Not yet." Was Aunt Bess crying?

"Aw, shucks," Teddy answered. "Doesn't she realize the Star Dusters are going to play the Buffalo Wonders tomorrow? We've got to have her! Won't you tell her that—" But the rest was lost to Natalie's ears, for Miss Lee quickly crossed the room and closed the window. Then she came back to the bed and took Natalie's hand in hers. They were nice hands, thought Natalie, and strong too, not soft and weak like most women's hands.

"I'm glad you are awake, Natalie," Miss Lee said. "For now you and I can begin to get acquainted." She smiled at Natalie, who did her best to smile back, although she felt more like crying. But it was not in Natalie Harding's code to cry.

"By the way, your father asked me to let him know as soon as you woke up," said Miss Lee. "Shall

I call him? He is going to the office today, the first time for a week."

"For a week," echoed Natalie in surprise. "Why, it was just yesterday that he and I were driving, and—"

She stopped suddenly, for now she remembered what had been perplexing her. She closed her eyes to think better, and lay so still that Miss Lee thought she had fallen asleep again. But Natalie was not sleeping. Her thoughts went scurrying from one corner of her mind to another, collecting pieces of memory to weave into a pattern. Now it was all coming back to her.

She and her father had been driving along the boulevard trying out the new car, or, as her father called it, "taking the good ship on her maiden voyage." She had been so proud of the new car, with its gay canary-colored body and shiny steel trimmings. Daddy and Aunt Bess and she had picked it out from many others at the Auto Show in New York City last November. And it had just come!

They had named it right then and there at the show, much to the annoyance of the salesman who had expected them to admire the upholstery and the wonders of the engine. But of course he could not possibly have known how important names were to the Harding family. They had a name for everything.

"Let's call it Bobolink," Natalie had suggested.

"But bobolinks aren't yellow." Aunt Bess, who was very correct and particular about such things, had protested.

"This one is," Daddy had said, as he kissed Aunt Bess right on her little turned-up nose, salesman or no salesman. "Don't you go getting so accurate, old lady, just because you are President of the Audubon Bird Club," he had chided.

So Bobolink it was. And Natalie and her father had had such a splendid secret about it! They were going to take some rides out into the country. On the safe little back roads, where there was scarcely any traffic, Daddy was going to teach her to drive. They were not going to let Aunt Bess know about this until Natalie became quite expert, for things like that were inclined to make Aunt Bess nervous.

But one day, so went the plan, when the three of them were out in the car together, Daddy was going to climb down from his seat and say, "Miss Natalie Harding at the wheel." Then Natalie would slide in under the steering wheel, and, much to her aunt's consternation, would step on the accelerator and away they'd go "with the lady's expression changing from bewilderment to pleasure," Daddy had prophesied.

Yes, that had been the wonderful dream. But how differently it had all turned out! One afternoon

Daddy had come driving home in state in the new car, arriving just as Natalie came in from high school.

"Let's go for a spin, girls," Daddy had said, gaily. He always called them girls when he was feeling particularly happy. "Then we'll celebrate with ice cream sodas at the Goody Shop."

"Oh, how I wish I could!" Aunt Bess had said. "But I promised old Mrs. Craven that I would be in all afternoon if she called. But you two run along, anyway. And do be careful!"

"Be careful." Of course Daddy had been careful. He was a wonderful driver. But just as they had rounded a corner a great red truck had shot out ahead of them—and all of a sudden—all of a sudden she had cried out, "Oh, Daddy!" Then what had happened next? She remembered a frightful, splintering noise as if the whole universe had blown up, a blinding light, and then darkness.

So that was why she was lying in bed with a trained nurse to take care of her! Natalie opened her eyes and saw her nurse still standing beside her.

"Was my father hurt too, Miss Lee?" she asked.

"Not very badly. His arm is broken, and he had some bruises, but he will be all right soon. Shall I call him?"

"Yes, please, but tell him I can't roughhouse with him this morning." Oh dear! Why did she want to cry, Natalie wondered. It didn't hurt very much

unless she moved, yet she felt like such a baby!

The solemn, quiet man who came into her room with his arm in a sling did not seem much like her splendid playmate, the envy of all her friends. Natalie was perhaps too old for that sort of thing, but she and her father had never given up their early morning scrimmage. "That's our daily dozen," Daddy had once said, when Aunt Bess protested.

But his voice was the same as he spoke to his daughter. "Hi, Nats."

"Hello, Daddy," she tried to smile. "How's things?" It was their daily greeting. But it was too much for her father. He turned his head away to hide his own grief.

"See here, Corporal. 'Tenshun!" Natalie said with mock severity.

Her father responded huskily, "Aye, aye, sir."

"It's scandalous the way we mix up the Army and Navy, Miss Lee," he said as soon as he had recovered his composure. "But it's our game and we'll stick to it."

They all laughed. "Well, darling," said her father, "I must get along to the office. I'll see you tonight."

He bent to kiss her, but could not put his arm around her because of the bandage.

"I'm sorry you hurt your wing, Dad. Does it feel very bad?"

"Just a little."

"Is it the right one, Dad?"

"'Fraid so, Nats."

"Then how will you draw?"

"Oh, it will get better soon. Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye, Daddy."

After her father closed the door behind him, Natalie listened until she heard his steps going down the stairs. She felt sad and frightened. She wondered how bad it all was. Would they tell her the truth, or treat her like a baby the way most people do when one is sick?

There was so much to worry about! If her father's hand was hurt how would he be able to draw the comic strips that kept the Harding's own private big bad wolf from the door, as her father called it? And what about herself? What had happened to her? Why was it so important that she lie still? How soon would she be able to go back to school?

Would her nurse tell her the truth, Natalie wondered, or would she act like most people and try to hide things? She looked like a straightforward kind of person. Well, she would ask, anyway.

"Miss Lee," she called.

"Yes, dear." She has a nice voice as well as strong hands, Natalie thought to herself, and no fuss about her.

"Miss Lee, will you tell me something?"

"I'll tell you what I can, of course, Natalie," an-

swered Miss Lee. "What is it you want to know?"

"First of all, will Daddy's hand be all right?"

"Why, of course it will," Miss Lee's voice sounded very reassuring, as if she meant what she said. "Lots of people break their arms or wrists or even hands, and they heal."

"But Daddy is an artist. He needs his hand more than most people need theirs. It is more important."

"Even so, Natalie, artists' hands heal just like other peoples'," and Miss Lee was smiling at her.

"Please don't joke about it," begged Natalie. "Oh, dear, I thought *you* would be different!"

"Why, Natalie," concern and surprise were mingled in Leonora Hart's voice. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," said Natalie, hesitatingly, "grown people have a way of keeping the truth away from kids, most of all when they are sick. Don't you know, Miss Lee, that I'd rather know than not know? It's not knowing that scares me. Don't you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I do understand, my dear," Miss Lee answered soberly. "And I respect the way you feel about it. But you must not think that doctors and nurses keep information away from their patients just to be contrary. Sometimes it works just the other way, and knowing too much about their condition only makes people worry more."

"Not for me, it wouldn't," Natalie answered stoutly.

"Very well. Ask me anything you wish and I will help you all I can to understand what has happened."

Natalie smiled. This nurse *was* different, after all! "Thanks," she said. "Then tell me really what happened to me."

"You hurt your back in the accident, Natalie. You know you had an accident, don't you?"

"Yes, Miss Lee. I remember the red truck hitting us in the new car, but nothing else. Is my back badly hurt?"

"Well, badly enough so that you will have to stay in bed for some weeks and you will have to lie quietly. Now that you are awake and I can boss you a little, you may be sure that I'll see to it you do a better job of staying still than you have been doing so far." She pretended to look very stern but her eyes were twinkling.

"What day is this? Goodness, if the game is tomorrow, as Teddy said, this must be Friday! Is it?"

"It is indeed," answered Miss Lee. "And I have been here since Monday evening, so think of all the time we have lost! You and I will have to hurry up and learn to know each other."

Natalie smiled. In spite of all the pain and worry, she decided getting acquainted with someone as nice as Miss Lee would be great fun.



Chapter II

CONFIDENCES

Natalie lay asleep, dreaming that she was running along a high cliff in the early morning sunshine. It was fun to run in the dream. But suddenly her foot slipped and she tumbled over the edge of the cliff and went falling and falling, dizzily, sickeningly, until bump! She landed with a thud in the valley below. She came wide awake with a jerk that sent the cruel fingers of pain digging into her back. She tried to lie still so as not to disturb Miss Lee, asleep in the day bed beside her, but suddenly Miss Lee leaned over her and said, softly, "Awake, dear?"

"Yes," answered Natalie. "I guess I jumped in my sleep, and it hurts. But I didn't mean to disturb you, Miss Lee. I'm so sorry."

"Never mind, darling. It's almost morning, anyway. I'll just slip a blanket around me and sit beside you and we'll watch the dawn together. Shall we?"

"I'd like to," Natalie said, trying to keep her lips from quivering.

But before she took her seat at Natalie's bedside, Miss Lee smoothed the girl's pillow and straightened the crumpled sheet under her. Then she lit the little spirit lamp on the table and heated a cup of milk which she brought for Natalie to drink.

"How do you know how to do so many things to make a person feel better, Miss Lee?" Natalie asked gratefully. "You're a wonder!"

"Why, making her patient as comfortable as possible is the nurse's first job," said Miss Lee with a little laugh.

"Still," said Natalie, as she sipped the warm drink Miss Lee held for her, "you are extra-specially good at it. How did you happen to be a nurse, Miss Lee? Not that it's any wonder you did!"

"Well, Nats," said Miss Lee, settling beside Natalie, and smoothing the girl's forehead with strong, gentle hands, "I have always thought that making sick people well was about the most important thing a person could do with his life. That's been my am-

bition ever since I have known what I wanted to do.”

“But didn’t you change your mind a lot of times, Miss Lee, about what you wanted to do when you grew up, and ever think about other things to do?”

“No dear, I don’t believe I ever did. No doubt if I had had a special talent like singing or drawing it would have been different. But why do you ask?”

“Because that’s not a bit like me,” Natalie said. “Maybe I am more changeable than you are. Sometimes I want to be one thing and sometimes another. You see, I’ve always been a good athlete and some of the time I think I want to be an athletic instructor at a big school, but most of the time—well, maybe you will think I am a copycat—but I’d love to be an artist like Daddy.”

“I think that’s a splendid thing to want to be,” said Miss Lee. “Some day when you are better, show me some of your pictures, will you? You have some, have you not?”

“I should say I have,” answered Natalie. “I’ve been trying to draw all my life, almost. I’ve even kept a diary in pictures instead of in words.” A wave of pain swept over her and she held Miss Lee’s hand tight in both her own.

“That’s the girl!” said Miss Lee, encouragingly. “Hold on tight. It will go away in a minute. After all, you have only to stand it minute by minute, did you ever think of that? I learned that from my fa-

ther—a very wise man he was, and a hardy one. He had to be to do his job.”

“What was that?” Natalie asked.

“A very surprising one,” Miss Lee answered. “He was one of the engineers who helped build the Panama Canal. Why, Nats, here I have been with you several days and I don’t believe I have ever told you that I was born and brought up far away in Panama!”

“Really,” cried Natalie, interested in spite of the pain. “What a funny place to live. Is there anything there besides the Canal?”

“Oh, yes indeed,” said Miss Lee. “There is the spick-and-span Canal Zone where the people connected with the work of the Canal live, and where I went to school and studied much the same lessons as you have here. But right next door, so to speak, is the jungle, wild and riotous and almost as untamed as it was when Columbus found it, and when Balboa hacked his way across it and came out upon the Pacific on the other side.”

“Gee, that’s interesting. But how did you ever happen to come up here?”

“I’m afraid you will laugh at me,” Miss Lee answered. “But to tell the truth it was a nursery rhyme of my childhood that started me off—*The Night Before Christmas*. Isn’t that silly? I just had to see snow and icicles and sleighs and reindeer, for I thought they really did land sleighs on rooftops, you see.

Leonora's reindeer were a family joke in our household. As a small girl I used to beg and beg for a real Christmas, as I called it, up north. So one year my father managed it. I came up and stayed with my uncle who is a doctor. He and his family live in Albany. Living with that doctor-uncle furthered my desire to be a nurse."

"So did you stay with your uncle and start learning to be a nurse then?" Natalie asked.

"Oh, no indeed. It was many years later, not until after my father and mother died, that I came north for good. Then I lived with my uncle's family while I took my training. That uncle is a very good friend of your Dr. Burgess, by the way. That is how it happened that I came here, all the way from Albany to take care of you."

"And have you stayed up north ever since you came that time to study?"

"Yes, except for one trip about three years ago. I went back to Panama and stayed for nearly a year getting acquainted all over again with my brother and his family. And what fun that was! Can you imagine what a three-ring circus a household is that contains three girls and two boys, to say nothing of a couple of pups, a cat or two, and incidentally a very lively mother and father?"

"It sounds pretty lively. How old are the children?" asked Natalie.

“Well, Leonora, my namesake, is about three years older than you are, and Peter must be just about a year older, and the other three are much younger.”

“My it would be fun to live with a big family like that!” Natalie exclaimed. “I’ve never had any brothers or sisters, although of course Daddy makes himself over into anything I want. Sometimes he seems like an older brother, and he is always sort of father and mother both to me. I don’t mean that Aunt Bess isn’t a darling, only—but look here, Miss Lee, what does your brother do down there in Panama?”

“Oh, he is one of the pilots who take the boats through the locks. That’s a fascinating job and he loves it. He wouldn’t live anywhere else but Panama and has always made fun of me because I wanted to come north to live.”

“But don’t you ever get homesick?”

“Dreadfully! Especially so when I first came north. I remember once actually crying in English class over a poem that felt like Panama to me and brought back so vividly the sights and sounds of my childhood. I learned part of it later, the verse that seems like Panama.” Then she recited in her low, sweet voice:

“Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus
Dipping through the tropics by the palm-green shores,
With a cargo of diamonds,
Emeralds, amethysts,
Topazes and cinnamon, and gold moidores.”

“What a lovely poem!” exclaimed Natalie.

“Yes, isn’t it? And it was written by a man who loved the sea as much as I do, but who was lucky enough to be more articulate about it. Some day we will read more of his poetry, shall we?”

“Oh, I’d like to,” said Natalie. “But tell me more about Panama.”

“There are so many things to tell about Panama. It’s a little country but it has had an exciting past. But I’ll tell you what I like best, and that’s the seaport. It’s a wonderful seaport, Natalie. All sorts of people from almost every place in the world pass through Panama, some even wearing their native dress. I have often seen Hindus in high turbans and Orientals in very un-American looking clothes, hanging about the docks. And, oh Natalie, such ships! All sorts and conditions of ships filled with cargoes from all over the world and bound for strange ports in the seven seas. Cochineal bark from Peru—that’s what some dyes are made of—and coffee from Puerto Rico, and cocoa and ivory from Ecuador, and nitrate from Chile. Can’t you imagine what an exciting place it is?”

“I wish I could go there some day,” Natalie said, drowsily, for the soothing touch of Miss Lee’s hands was putting her to sleep.

“Perhaps we will, my dear,” her nurse answered softly. “Who knows?”



"I think these show real talent"

"I think you are a witch, Miss Lee," Natalie said with a yawn. "Don't you say a kind of Mumbo-Jumbo over me to put me to sleep? See, it's getting light. I'll have just forty winks, as Daddy says, before breakfast."

While Natalie slept Miss Lee watched her. How she wished she really were the witch that Natalie called her. How quickly she would charm away the pain and make the girl whole and well again.

As the days went by, Natalie asked her nurse more and more questions about the strange land of her birth and seemed never to tire of hearing stories of the far-off land of Panama which had so captured her imagination. In exchange Natalie confided everything she could remember of her own young life to Miss Lee, sometimes illustrating the anecdotes she told with her picture diary. They had many a good laugh over that diary, for Natalie's little sketches had real humor.

"Honey," said Miss Lee one day, when Natalie was showing her some of her more recent drawings, "I'm no art critic, of course, but I think these show real talent. What does your father say about them?"

"Oh, I haven't shown Daddy this stuff for years!" Natalie exclaimed. "He's a real artist. This junk isn't good enough to show him."

"All right, miss," Miss Lee answered, "but I'm sure he would be interested."

“Well,” said Natalie, “maybe I will some day, if I ever make anything that I think is good enough.”

Natalie had not known that two people could possibly know each other as well as she and Miss Lee were learning to do. Somehow the secret solitary thoughts that everybody has but few people can communicate, came out quite casually in her talks with Miss Lee. Was this the way girls talked to their mothers, Natalie wondered?

The house was very quiet most of the day. For Daddy was at the office, as they called the newspaper where he drew cartoons, and Aunt Bess, who was a very busy clubwoman, was away a great deal. Sometimes the mellow voice of “Big Black Glory” as she and Daddy secretly called the colored cook, Lucinda, would come up from the kitchen. It was a lovely voice, and her songs were all very devout. Natalie and Miss Lee always stopped whatever they were doing or talking about to listen.

“It’s no use asking her to sing,” Natalie once explained. “Daddy and I tried that once, and she said, ‘Land sakes, me? Ah cain’t sing, ah jes prays with mah lungs!’ ”

“I’ve heard many beautiful spirituals,” Miss Lee said, “but never any that she sings. I wonder where she learned them?”

“She didn’t learn them. She made them up, right out of her heart, Dad says, because she needed them.”

“That’s the best way to sing, and perhaps all great songs were made that way—out of the heart because the singer needed them. But tell me, how did you come to call her Black Glory?”

Natalie giggled. “I don’t remember about it, of course, I was much too little. You see, Miss Lee, when I was very little my mother died, and Aunt Bess—she’s Daddy’s younger sister, you know—came to live with us and bring me up. This old house we live in used to belong to my father’s family; it still belongs partly to Aunt Bess now.

“Well, to go on with my story, Aunt Bess advertised for a cook. Daddy says a couple of dozen inmates of menageries must have got hold of the ads—he made me a picture of the people who came—they were all sizes and shapes and ages and colors, he said. And he and Aunt Bess interviewed one after another of them, until they got more and more discouraged. Each applicant had so many good things to say for herself, but looked so unpromising.

“Then Lucinda—that’s Black Glory’s real name, you know, Lucinda Marianna Meeker—barged right into the room. She was so big and black that Daddy said he and Aunt Bess seemed to shrivel right up before her eyes. But they plucked up their courage and went through the regular questions. ‘Can you do good plain cooking?’ Aunt Bess asked. ‘Me?’ shouted Lucinda, ‘why, white folks, when you-all

tastes mah cooking you'll think you'se gone to glory!" "

Miss Lee laughed. "So they took her?"

"Yes, indeed, nothing could have stopped them then and she's been cooking for us ever since and that's been about eleven years."

As Natalie began to feel more comfortable she found it harder and harder to lie still. Sometimes she felt she must get up and walk around the room if it killed her. But she really knew better. The only way to keep the pain away was to lie perfectly still, a difficult thing for an athlete to do. Sometimes her eyes wandered to the mantel where the trophies she had won in swimming and tennis stood. At first she could not bear to think about them, but, as she was telling all she could remember to Miss Lee, stories of the games she had played would come out.

"Aunt Bess thinks I'm a terrible tomboy," she once confided. "She doesn't mind the tennis or the swimming. She was awfully pleased when I won the Junior Tennis Cup at the Country Club last summer, but she thinks I am too old to play baseball with the Gang. She hoped I'd give up all that when I got to be fourteen and entered high school, but it's such a lot of fun. The Gang says I'm the best shortstop they could find. I can pitch pretty well, too."

"I was that kind of youngster myself," Miss Lee said.

“Did you play ball?”

“I should rather say I did,” said Miss Lee. “I used to pitch on the team. I was the only girl on it. Of course I thought the reason that the boys let me play was because I had such a good curve, but later I learned it was because of the baseball which my elder brother had given me. That ball had actually been used in a World Series and my team thought it would bring them luck.”

“But Miss Lee, I really am pretty good. I can run circles around any girl my age and I’m faster than a lot of the boys. All the boys think I am, except Arthur Phillips,” and her tone was suddenly full of scorn.

“Who is he?” Miss Lee asked.

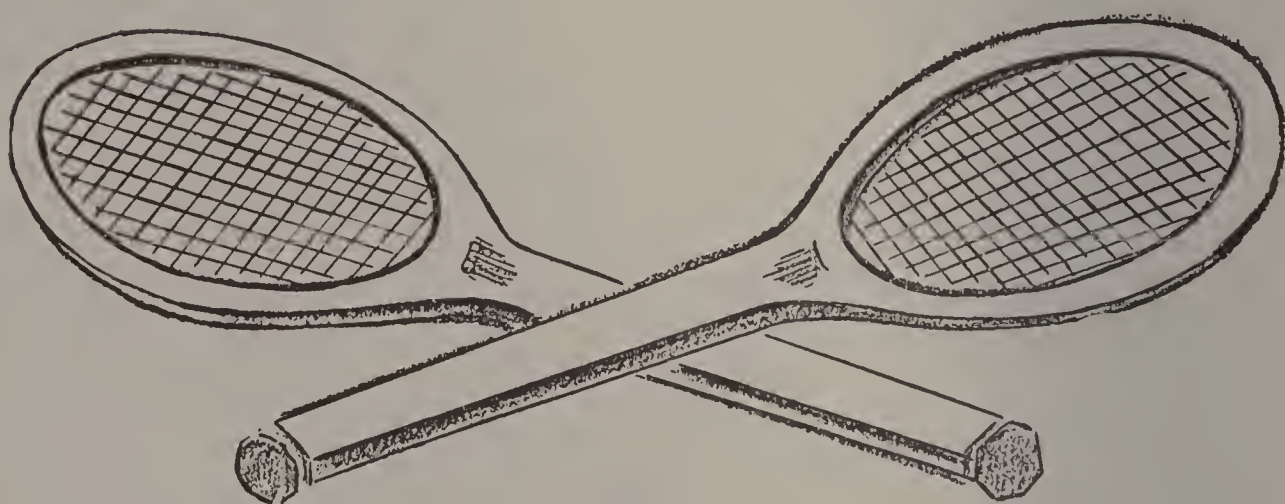
“The meanest boy in the world. I hate him!”

“Why, Natalie!”

“Well, I do,” Natalie answered defiantly. “He has always tried to get my place with the Gang. And he tried to get me disqualified on the Relay Race last spring on the grounds that I wasn’t a boy! He says girls shouldn’t try to do the things I do, that it isn’t their place. Imagine! Daddy laughs and says he is just an old-fashioned home boy and I am not to mind. But the worst of it is Aunt Bess agrees with Arthur! And his mother is one of Aunt Bess’ best friends. Well, no matter what old Arthur Phillips says about me, I’m one of the best runners in the whole school,

girl or no girl. Wait until you see me when I'm well."

Leonora Hart turned her face away abruptly. "Wait until I see her run," she repeated to herself. "Short of a miracle, I wonder if I ever will?"





Chapter III

THE FIRST GUEST

One afternoon, several days later, while Natalie slept and Miss Lee was resting, there was a light tap on the door of Natalie's room. Miss Lee silently crossed the room and opened the door to find Aunt Bess standing there.

"How is she, Miss Hart?" Aunt Bess had not unbent sufficiently to call the nurse by her nickname, although both Natalie and her father had used the convenient abbreviation from the first.

"About the same, Miss Harding. She is asleep now, without any of the medicine, I am glad to say. Dr. Burgess and I are so glad when we don't have to use the medicine, for it affects her appetite."

"I think I must ask the doctor if Natalie may have some of her friends in to call on her. It must be dreadfully dull for her," Aunt Bess said.

Miss Lee was inwardly amused. Pretty and pert and clever Elisabeth Harding undoubtedly was, but not overly tactful. Miss Lee was suddenly reminded of the time Natalie had remarked, "Aunt Bess is a darling, only—" Although Natalie in her loyalty would never say more than that, Miss Lee had come to understand, as the days went on in that household, what Natalie had meant by "only."

"I think we must wait a little while, Miss Harding, before we have company. Natalie must not move, you see, and it is very hard for her to lie still when she gets excited."

Although her aunt and nurse had been speaking in whispers, Natalie had overheard them.

"Oh, but really, Miss Lee, I will lie still," she called. "Mayn't I please have just one visitor?"

"If you are quiet all the rest of today and if Dr. Burgess agrees we will try one guest for half an hour tomorrow afternoon."

"Whom shall I invite," asked Aunt Bess. "Shall we have Ruth or Dorothy or—"

"Oh, please, Aunt Bess. If I may have only one caller, can't it be Teddy?"

"But," began Elisabeth Harding, then shrugged her shoulders. "All right, my dear," she said in a re-

signed tone, "Have it your own way. Shall I telephone the doctor for his permission, Miss Hart?"

"Yes, if you please," said Miss Lee. "And please tell him that Natalie promises to be extra quiet and patient if she may have this guest."

"Very well," answered Aunt Bess. "If the doctor gives his consent, I shall telephone Mrs. Davis and make arrangements for Teddy to come tomorrow."

Aunt Bess thought to herself as she left her niece's room that even this dreadful accident had done nothing to subdue Natalie's tempestuous character. She was devoted to the girl, but she did think it time for Natalie to outgrow her tomboy ways.

How she could prefer the companionship of Teddy Davis, two years her junior and a hobbled-hoy boy to the nice girls of her own age was beyond Aunt Bess' comprehension. And as for the rowdy youngsters on the block with whom Natalie still insisted upon playing, although she was in high school! Well! Their manners were appalling! Elisabeth Harding had tried to persuade her brother to put his foot down and insist that Natalie stop acting like such a tomboy. But he had only laughed.

"She will grow up and get over it one of these days," he had tried to reassure his sister. "In the meantime, she is getting strong and husky, learning to be a good sport, or to take it, as she would say. Let's let her alone. She will be all right. Why, be-

fore we know it she will be a grownup young lady. Please don't worry about it, Sis."

"Aunt Bess thinks it's funny that I like Teddy better than any of my other friends," Natalie confided to Miss Lee after her aunt had gone. "Teddy is younger than I am, of course, but we have always lived next door to each other and played together ever since we were babies. He never treats me differently because I am a girl, or has any of those silly notions like Arthur Phillips. Do you think it is very strange of me to want him to come, Miss Lee?"

"No I don't, dear. I know that age hasn't much to do with friendships. You like a person and want him for your friend if you and he understand each other. It doesn't have much rhyme or reason, does it?"

"Not a bit," answered Natalie. "Like you and me. Just think how much older you are than I am!"

"Yes," laughed Miss Lee. "And think what good friends we are!"

"Everybody was sure I'd drop Teddy after I got to high school," Natalie went on, "and he was still in the grades. Of course I don't see him in school any more, but things are just the same here on the block. It isn't that I don't like my other friends. Those two Aunt Bess was talking about, Ruth and Dorothy, are grand girls, but they don't care for athletics the way the Gang does."

“Soon we will have them in, too,” Miss Lee promised, “if you give a good account of yourself tomorrow. But you must lie quiet!”

“The girls will think I look pretty awful with my hair like this, so terribly short,” said Natalie. “I certainly hope it will grow out a little before they come. Of course I know it’s easier for you to take care of this way, Miss Lee. But goodness, how it must look!”

“Nonsense,” laughed Miss Lee. “It is such obligingly curly hair that it looks well no matter what one does with it.”

“Dorothy has about the prettiest hair I ever saw,” said Natalie, “not just an old dumb brown color like mine. She is as blonde as Miriam Hopkins. Everybody tells her she ought to go into the movies.”

“And does she want to be an actress?”

“Oh, no. She is crazy about books. She wants to be a writer more than anything else. It’s Ruth who wants to be an actress, although I don’t think she has ever told anyone but me. So you mustn’t let her know I told you.”

“I won’t,” promised Miss Lee. “I’ve spoken to them several times already, you know, for they often come to the door to ask how you are. One of these days we will have a party for all of them. But meanwhile, let’s go slow so that you will not be too tired when Teddy calls tomorrow.”

Teddy Davis all washed and brushed, came in at about four the next afternoon. He was so quiet and subdued that Natalie scarcely knew him. He sat primly on the edge of his chair by Natalie's bed, looking at her as if she were some strange specimen in a glass case. He replied to her questions with a half-choked little "Yes" or "No," and volunteered no remarks of his own. Miss Lee finally decided that it was her unaccustomed presence that was responsible for his reticence, so she tactfully withdrew. That was better. Natalie soon drew him out by asking all sorts of questions about the Gang. How had the ball games been going this spring? Had the tennis courts been rolled yet?

When she asked who was playing shortstop in her place on the team, poor Teddy stammered and grew red-faced, and finally said sheepishly, "Arthur Phillips."

"What?" asked Natalie in disgust. "That little shrimp? Aw, Teddy, you tell the Gang they *have* to get someone else. You know how he acts. He'll try to keep my place, now he's got it. Don't you remember what he did in last year's Relay Races? He's always wanted to be on our Nine. Please don't let him stay!"

"Honest, Nats," said Teddy. "I didn't want him either, because I know you are sore at him, but the rest of the Gang want him. He's a swell player, Nats."



"The doctor says you maybe won't ever walk"

He made two home runs Saturday. The Gang wants to keep him. Especially since you—since you can't—since you—"

"But Teddy, it won't be very long. The Gang isn't that mean, to hit a fellow when he's down. Tell them their old Arthur Phillips can play now, but as soon as I'm well again he's got to get off the team for good."

"But Nats, they say you aren't going to get well enough to play."

"Who said that?"

"Your Aunt Bess told my mother. The doctor says you maybe won't ever walk, so how can you play on the team?"

"Oh, Teddy, Teddy, are you sure, did you really hear your mother say that?"

"Of course I'm sure, Nats. All the Gang knows that. Aw gee, Nats, I didn't mean to make you cry. Aw shucks!" The poor boy walked over to the bed and sat down beside Natalie, awkwardly dabbing at her head with his sweaty little hand.

"Go away, Teddy, go away!" sobbed Natalie.

Teddy stumbled down the stairs, his heart heavy with the disaster he had thoughtlessly caused. Soon Miss Lee was kneeling beside the sobbing girl.

"Why did you all lie to me," the child spoke through her heartbreaking sobs, "oh, why did you lie to me?"

"Natalie, child," said Miss Lee, "we didn't lie."

"You did, you said it would be a long time, but—"

"Look here, Natalie, I'm going to treat you like a woman. You're almost one now. What is it, fifteen your next birthday? Well, we hope and think you are going to be all right again. But you will be in bed for a long time."

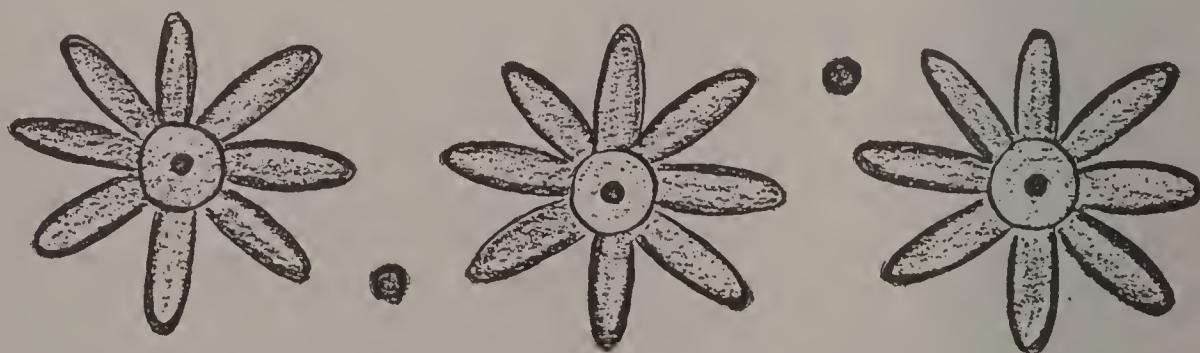
"How long?"

"We don't know. If I knew I would tell you. But this I promise, I *will* tell you. You and I and the doctor and your father will fight this thing and win. Now then, heads up. Be a good soldier. I promise to help you as long as you need me. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes."

Leonora Hart stooped to kiss her. "Now, dear, let's have some rest. Drink this and let's be quiet and see if sleep won't come."

But it was a long time before sleep came. The poor child lay sobbing quietly, her hot little hand in Miss Lee's cool one. Just before she fell asleep she whispered, "Don't let them scold Teddy for telling me. I'm glad I know." So Miss Lee promised.





Chapter IV

MINNIE MIS-HAP TO THE RESCUE

There was not much change in the life at Harding Hall before summer. Early in July Aunt Bess was asked to chaperone a party of students to Europe. At first she refused to leave her sick family.

"Be fair to yourself, Bess," Daddy remonstrated. "Don't stay because of us two. Besides, isn't Miss Lee here, and Black Glory?" So Aunt Bess finally went.

It was very quiet on Natalie's street. Most of the parents of the Gang had taken their children and gone off to one summer resort or another for the hot weather. The Camp at Georgian Bay which was Natalie and her father's pride and joy was leased for the summer.

Natalie tried to persuade her father to go to the Camp without her, but he stoutly refused. "Why I'd get lost without you to boss me around, Nats," he protested, winking at Miss Lee. "Heaven knows what kind of a jam I'd get myself into. Don't you remember the time I was sketching in the canoe and I let the paddle float off? If you hadn't been such a good swimmer we'd be floating around in old Tyler-Too yet!"

"Wait a minute," cried Miss Lee. "You two go too fast for me. First of all, what is Tyler-Too?"

"Now, Miss Lee, don't tell me you have so far forgotten your American history that you don't remember that we once had a president called Tippecanoe and his running mate was Tyler-Too?"

"Yes, but why call your canoe Tyler-Too? Why didn't you name yours for the president?"

"Now how do you explain that, Nats?" Daddy asked solemnly. "How do you explain to a sensible lady that everybody else calls *their* canoes Tippecanoe so that's why the Hardings call theirs Tyler-Too?"

"You funny people!" said Miss Lee. She was learning to know this little family so well, having been through so much with them, that the old reserve of nurse to patient and to employer was gradually being broken down. To see and hear them one would have thought they were very old and dear friends.

"Go on," commanded Miss Lee.

"Well, you see, Miss Lee, Daddy the Dreamer and I were out in the canoe one day just moseying around when Dad got an idea for a sketch. So he did a very poor and unwoodsman-like job of beaching the paddle."

"And the law of gravity intervened," interposed Daddy.

"Yes," said Natalie, "and off floated the paddle 'way out of reach."

"Whereupon Natalie Harding, the dauntless and brave, seeing the predicament which her absent-minded father had placed them in, stood up in the canoe, all but upsetting the poor wretch, and swam nimbly after the paddle. Honestly, Miss Lee," Daddy went on, "I fully expected her to bring it back in her mouth like a well-trained retriever."

"And did she?" asked Miss Lee, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Silly!" said Natalie. "Of course not. But I can swim with one hand as well as anyone—or I could,

I mean.” There was a little catch in her voice. It was so hard to remember, and remembering, so hard to bear.

“Why, I remember that incident,” exclaimed Miss Lee, “You had it in Minnie Mis-hap, didn’t you?”

“Did you know Minnie before you came here?” Natalie asked in surprise.

“Of course. Don’t forget that Minnie Mis-hap is in the Albany paper too. I follow her every day. By the way, Mr. Harding, I’ve always wanted to ask you how you ever came to think up Minnie.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Natalie. “I had been very sick with flu and while I was convalescing, Dad drew pictures of this silly person who was always upsetting things and having accidents, just to amuse me. You see in those days, Miss Lee, Dad was a serious artist doing portraits of people, and so forth.”

“When they wanted any,” put in Daddy, “which wasn’t often enough to do anything about the wolf-at-the-door.”

“Well, they were beautiful pictures even if very few people ever bought them,” Natalie said loyally.

“So then what happened?” asked Miss Lee.

“Well, I laughed so much at the drawings that Daddy went on making more and more of them and sold them to the *Daily News*, although he said they were so easy to do that it was a shame to take the money. First we called the character Sloppy-weather

but later we changed her name to Minnie Mis-hap."

"So that was the birth of Minnie?" asked Miss Lee.

"Yes," said Daddy, "and the luckiest case of flu you ever saw. Our family fortunes took an upturn then and there, when I stopped being a hack artist and became a comic strip maker. Natalie and I have had a lot of fun thinking up plots for Minnie's strip. She's been a big help to me there. She's sort of Minnie's godmother, you see."

Natalie's eyes were shining.

"We all think up plots, even Aunt Bess. Don't you remember, Dad, a long time ago when you bought that second-hand station wagon and you and Aunt Bess and I went on a picnic and got stuck in the mud on the way home? Poor Aunt Bess was due at a committee meeting at the Y.W. and we thought she would be awfully cross, but all she said was, 'More grist for Minnie's mill, I suppose.' "

They all laughed. "And a couple of years ago Minnie was syndicated all over the state. Oh, weren't we glad when the syndication happened, Dad?" Natalie asked. "It meant we could buy the Camp and do lots of things we had always wanted to, Miss Lee."

The three were sipping their iced tea out on the sleeping porch that adjoined Natalie's bedroom. Natalie spent most of her time here. Now that she had a bed that moved around, and one that could be adjusted to different angles, she was much freer and

more comfortable. She had been writing little notes that day, and one to Aunt Bess was lying on the bed. In it Natalie had drawn a little caricature of herself in what she called "the bed that sits up", to show her aunt. Daddy picked up the sketch.

"May I see this, Nats?" he asked, and when she nodded he studied it carefully.

"By Jove, my dear, that's good. Why honey, that's much better drawn than anything of yours I've ever seen before. Look, Miss Lee."

Natalie was pleased. She knew that her father was supercritical about drawing and did not praise easily.

"Why, I think that's splendid," Miss Lee said. "Not that I know anything about drawing, of course."

"Oh, Daddy," said Natalie, "I can do better than that!"

"Why don't we show your father the picture diaries that you let me see that day?" Miss Lee suggested.

"Okay," said Natalie. "Get them out if you want to while I hide my blushes."

Donald Harding pored over the scrap books for several minutes before he spoke again. Then, "Miss Natalie Harding," he said, pretending to be stern, "may I ask why I have not been allowed to see these books before? Just why have you been holding back on me?"

"Because I didn't think they were good enough to

let a real artist see, Dad. I used to show you the ones I did a couple of years ago when I was a kid, and then the only ones that were any good at all were those I did with you holding my hand and guiding the pencil. But this stuff—" she finished scornfully.

"My dear, you are much too modest," her father answered.

"There!" said Miss Lee. "What did I tell you?"

"Look here, Nats," Daddy said. "Do all of this you can. Of course, don't tire yourself, because getting well is Job Number One for you. But get into the habit of thinking in lines. Even if you have energy enough to try only a few strokes each day. When you lie here talking to Miss Lee, put the people you are talking about into lines on paper. I'll bring you some good lightweight sketching pads and some proper pencils." Daddy's voice sounded very excited.

Just then the warm voice of Black Glory swept up to them. Quick as a wink Natalie seized her pencil and pad and drew a few swift lines of the large black treasure, her mouth opened wide in song.

"To the life!" exclaimed Daddy. "And just a little funnier than fact ever is. That's the trick of a good cartoon. Bless your heart, you'll *have* to hurry up and get well. There's Art School ahead for you, my girl!"

For a moment—a long, happy moment—Natalie

forgot the pain and the fear in a beautiful daydream of a huge studio somewhere away up in the clouds atop a New York apartment house, with Daddy and herself seated side by side at their easels.

Suddenly she remembered that her father had not shown her any new sketches of Minnie since their accident.

"Dad," she said, "I haven't seen any new sketches of Minnie for ever so long. Haven't you any new ones to show me?"

Her father's face was a study. Natalie had never seen him look like that before. He looked almost as if he were afraid of something.

"I—I haven't been making any new ones lately, Nats," he said quietly.

"Why not, Dad? They haven't given up the strip, I know. Miss Lee and I see it in the paper every day."

"Those are old ones. I was away ahead of myself on sketches before we had our accident, and we had a lot to use up."

"What are you going to do when they are gone?" asked Natalie. "You must hurry up and make more."

"Well," answered her father reluctantly, "maybe we'll sell the idea to another cartoonist when they are gone."

"Sell Minnie? Why Dad, you might as well talk about selling me. Please tell me all about it. I can't

stand it if I don't know the truth about things. Miss Lee and I have a pact that she will tell me all about my case. It's terrible to have important things kept secret."

Miss Lee and Natalie's father exchanged a long look. "I think I would tell Natalie if I were you, Mr. Harding," Miss Lee said in her soft, low voice.

"All right, Nats, here goes. Look here." He stretched his long, slender fingers toward her. "It was more than a broken hand I had. My hand was burned by the gasoline. A lot of the pain came from the burn, although I didn't have sense enough to know it at the time. And the darn old fingers healed up crooked. Fact is, at the moment, I can't draw at all. I've been trying to be patient about it, thinking that it will get better soon. Now the doctor says that they must cut the skin and let it heal all over again. He thinks that after that is done my hand can be massaged and everything will be all right. But meanwhile—well—now you see why I haven't been able to make any new Minnie strips."

Natalie reached over and patted the poor crooked hand. "Oh, Daddy," she cried, "why didn't you tell me!" He put his arm around her and she rested her head upon his shoulder. Miss Lee tiptoed away.

"But Dad," Natalie asked after awhile, "what do you do at the office all day if you aren't drawing Minnie?"

"Oh, I help around. They consult me about pictures and I go out and get advertising. I keep pretty busy."

"Do they pay you?"

"Why, of course, silly. Do you think I am so big-hearted that I would work for nothing? Of course, since we seem to be playing Truth, I'll have to confess that after all the Minnie pictures are used up, it won't be as much."

"Then will we be poor, Dad?"

"I don't think so, my dear. If I can't get going on the strip again, I am sure I shall be able to pick up other work. And please don't worry your head about it or I shall be sorry I told you."

"I won't, Dad, but I think you're a brick."

"The same to you, Cap'n," answered Daddy. "But it's funny about Minnie Mis-hap," her father continued. "Lots of other comic strips are drawn by people other than the artist who created the character. Take Mr. and Mrs. for instance. After Briggs died, other people drew them just the same. But we tried Minnie out on a couple of artists and they didn't seem to get the hang of it. Then we decided that I would supply new stories but we would use the same old pictures posed differently, but somehow I haven't been able to think up any good new plots for Minnie."

Natalie said nothing but she wondered if perhaps

she couldn't help bring Minnie back to life again. Her father's praise of her sketches had given her a confidence in her own ability far greater than she had ever before known.

She determined to trace the figure of Minnie many times in many poses from cartoons already printed until she got the knack of it. Then, perhaps, who knew? Maybe she could take some of her father's discarded sketches and fix them up a bit to fill in the time until his hand should be really healed and he could draw again. No wonder other artists could not get the hang of Minnie Mis-hap, no matter how clever they were, thought Natalie. Minnie was *their* character, hers and her father's!

So, without telling her father why she wanted them, she asked him to bring in his Minnie Mis-hap scrap book and also his portfolio of half-finished and discarded sketches for her to look at, just for fun. Natalie confided the whole plot to Miss Lee who thereafter obligingly hid Natalie's drawings whenever Mr. Harding came into the room.

Then one day, Natalie had a drawing that suited her. She had adapted one of her father's old sketches and made a picture of Minnie Mis-hap trudging up a steep hill, laden with bundles and bags, a parrot cage, a kitten, a hatbox, all askew. And out of her mouth a banner floated which said, "Goodbye, everybody, I'm retiring to the Old Folks Home."

That night Natalie showed the sketch to her father. And never in her life had she been so happy. "Nats, my angel, my lifesaver," Daddy shouted like a boy. "You've rung the bell! We'll publish this and see how our readers take it, and, if they want more Minnie Mis-hap pictures, you will draw them and together we will think up plots!"

Daddy looked younger than he had since the day when he and Nats took the ill-fated Bobolink on her maiden voyage.





Chapter V

UNCLE BILL

Daddy was as good as his word. A few days later there appeared in the *Buffalo Daily News* and in the other papers throughout the state in which Minnie Mis-hap was syndicated, the cartoon drawn by Natalie. Not a strip, this time, just the picture with the caption, "Farewell to Minnie." And the next day and every day for a week the *Daily News* and many of the other papers received letters and even telegrams from their irate readers protesting Minnie's retirement.

Natalie and Daddy had a wonderful time reading the letters. They seemed to come from every sort

and condition of newspaper reader. One old man had written in a very shaky hand, "Tell Minnie she ought to be ashamed of herself for retiring so young. I am eighty-three and still working as a watchman for the Brancheville Railroad." And another which brought tears to Natalie's eyes read, "I'm a little girl of ten. I been sick in bed for 3 years. Pleeze don't stop Minnie. I reed her every day."

Of course there was no stopping her now. Daddy talked the matter over carefully with Dr. Burgess and Miss Lee, and they decided that a few hours' work a week adapting Daddy's old Minnie Mis-hap sketches would not hurt Natalie. Besides the feeling of usefulness that the work gave her, would be an excellent tonic.

Now the ideas for Minnie Mis-hap came rushing back into her father's head. They had very jolly days in which Miss Lee shared. Summer crept into autumn and the Gang came back almost before Natalie realized it.

Dr. Burgess said she could have callers all the time now, provided she did not move around and that only a few came at one time. Natalie was looking forward to the visits with the old Star Dusters as the Gang called themselves. She would check up with them on the events in the world of sports on which they prided themselves that they were well informed. She would listen to their tales of summer activities,

for she was sure she had schooled herself against envy.

Most important of all she would help them make plans for the coming football and hockey season. They could talk over tactics and signals with her, even if she could not actually play. Natalie planned that her sickroom was to be a kind of clubhouse for the Gang, where they would foregather after school.

To her surprise and great disappointment, it did not work out like that at all. The boys were self-conscious in her presence. They felt it unkind of them to tell her of their own good times, of their swimming and fishing expeditions, of their hikes and the many out-of-door activities that had occupied them all summer. Worst of all, they found it all but impossible to keep the name of their new leader, Arthur Phillips, out of their conversation. And Natalie Harding could not hear that name without a wave of angry resentment. Arthur Phillips had usurped her place, that was all too clear.

Except for Teddy, Natalie came to care less and less for the Gang. She could not make them talk of sports, and short of sports, she found they had little interest in anything else. She had to admit to herself that she enjoyed talking to Miss Lee or planning a new Minnie strip with her father much more than trying to talk with the Gang. Then, too, she was enjoying, more than she would ever have believed,

the visits of some of the girls of whom her aunt had so highly approved.

Chief among her friends were Ruth and Dorothy, the would-be author and the would-be actress. They and Natalie called themselves the Three A Club, actress, author and artist, and held long, secret sessions making plans for a brilliant future which they would some day share. In this plan no boys were ever included. "They are a lot of hooey," Ruth said, with a toss of her blonde head. "Boys just clutter up the landscape, and don't get you anywhere."

"But they're fun, sometimes," protested Dorothy, "especially at dances."

"Yes," Ruth reluctantly admitted. "But you can't just dance all your life."

Harding Hall was a scene of much excitement these days, for the family received word that Aunt Bess was coming home. All of a sudden her letters had taken on a different tone. They were full of loving remarks about the family and of her eagerness to get back to them. At the beginning of her European journey her letters had been what Donald Harding had called "very authentic travelogues." Little by little, however, he had noticed repeated references to a Doctor Rodgers, which changed to Dr. William Rodgers, then to Bill Rodgers and once, just once, simply Bill. Apparently this young doctor and his sister were seeing a good deal of each other.

In the last letter which would arrive before Aunt Bess' boat docked at New York City, was an item which interested Natalie and her father a great deal. "Bill Rodgers has been taking some highly advanced work with a famous surgeon in Vienna. He will be connected with one of the leading hospitals in New York specializing in operating on patients given up as hopeless invalids. He wants very much to come up and look Natalie over before he settles in New York, so I would like to bring him home with me. Please don't bother to come to New York to meet the boat. Bill and I can get along quite nicely, and I'm sure you won't want to leave Natalie."

They spoke to Dr. Burgess of this who said that he had heard that Dr. Rodgers was a very brilliant young surgeon and that he would be delighted to talk over the possibility of an operation with him. Donald Harding breathed a sigh of relief. He knew his sister's forthright way of going about things that she thought should be done, without bothering to keep off people's toes. Miss Lee also confessed some worry on the matter, so they were delighted at the sensible and co-operative spirit of the old doctor.

"Not that we would let anybody's hurt feelings stand in the way of having our Nats able to walk again," Daddy said.

And now Natalie, who had been secretly dreading the return of her rather proper aunt, though she was

much too loyal to confess it even to Daddy and Miss Lee, began counting the days until Aunt Bess' arrival.

The great day came at last. Daddy and Miss Lee had decorated the whole house with special attention to Natalie's own room. Natalie had drawn a perfectly ridiculous picture of Minnie Mis-hap getting all tangled up in a large streamer on which was written "Welcome Home." Minnie was attempting to hang it across the front of Harding Hall. Lucinda had outdone herself in preparing dainties.

The family decided that it would be a little too wearing for Natalie to have the first dinner of state served in her room, although the three of them had eaten most of their suppers on Natalie's sleeping porch during the summer. So she and Miss Lee were to have their meal quietly alone. The rest of the party would join them for coffee and sweets afterwards.

Natalie could hardly believe her eyes when she saw Aunt Bess. Always before her aunt had practically disguised her good looks in what Daddy called her "worthy worker clothes." But here she was with a saucy little hat perched on one side of her head, and an outfit that even a blind man would know smacked of Paris shops. And she was radiantly happy. It was easy to see why, when she and the young doctor looked at each other. And if there was any lingering doubt in Natalie's mind it was dispelled when she

said, "I'm very glad to meet you, Dr. Rodgers," and he had answered.

"Just let's say Uncle Bill, shall we, Nats?"

Talking about it afterward alone with Miss Lee, Natalie remarked that never before in her life had she seen Aunt Bess blush.

Next morning came the long examination and consultation with Dr. Burgess. Natalie tried hard to bear it. But it hurt and it was dreadfully hard to keep the tears back. She did pretty well, however. Well enough to have Dr. Bill say, when it was over, "You're a plucky kid, all right."

To which dear old Dr. Burgess responded, "A braver little woman never lived, Doctor." It sounded rather sentimental, Natalie thought, but she did like hearing Dr. Burgess call her that!

The two doctors and Donald Harding were closeted in her father's study for a long while. At last the three of them, looking very solemn, came into her room.

"Natalie," said Dr. Rodgers, "your father here says that he and your nurse and you have been talking about all this very frankly since your accident. And he wants me to tell you just what we think and let you decide what you want us to do. Shall we?"

"Yes, please."

"All right. This is very serious, and I want you to think about it hard and let me know after you

have. Don't decide hastily. All we can say is that we hope an operation will be successful. I have seen this done before; I have done it several times in Vienna. Once a boy worse off than you are was able to walk after being bed-ridden for five years. But it doesn't always succeed. Now then, it means many months in the hospital. And it means a certain amount of pain. You have plenty of time, and we know you can stand pain and we will make it as easy as possible for you, of course. But the worst is the uncertainty. You are happy here with your father and your good nurse and you have even helped be breadwinner with your cartoons. All that you will have to give up for awhile."

"And if it doesn't succeed," asked Natalie in a quiet little voice, "what will happen? Will I be worse off than I am now, or just the same?"

"After awhile about the same," said Dr. Bill.

"Then how can you all ask?" Natalie demanded. "Of course I'll take a chance. There's only one reason that would make me hesitate. I know we haven't much money. Can we afford it, Daddy?" she asked, turning to her father.

Donald Harding did not trust himself to speak. He just nodded his head. And Aunt Bess said, quickly, "There won't be any charge for the operation, my pet. Bill is giving it to me for my wedding present."

Natalie turned shining eyes to Dr. Bill. Her new,

grown-up manners left her, and she reverted to the little tomboy, the pride of the Gang and the despair of her aunt.

“Gosh, Uncle Bill,” she cried, “you’re one swell egg!”

“Well,” said Dr. Bill, “now that’s settled! Let’s draw up our plans. I think I should have a week or two to find my way around in the new hospital before Natalie comes and then she should be there another few weeks for observation and building up before the operation. Not that she isn’t in fine shape, thanks to Dr. Burgess and Miss Hart. And during that time, we’ll get that hand of yours in shape, Donald. For the first week or so, you and Natalie will be there together and you can visit with her each day and keep each from getting lonely.”

Busy days followed. Natalie and her father fairly spilled ideas for Minnie. They determined to leave enough material behind to last for the time Donald Harding would be away. After that he would be able to draw the pictures himself. Dr. Bill was sure of that.

One day a great ambulance drove up to the door. Natalie was carried down from her room on a stretcher and put inside on a comfortable bed. There was a seat beside it for Miss Lee, who was going to ride all the way into New York with her. And Daddy was to sit up in front with the driver. It was

a long trip, but they planned to stop and rest along the way.

Quite a crowd was gathered in the grounds of Harding Hall. Big Black Glory stood on the steps, wiping her eyes on her copious white apron. The Gang stood sheepishly at the doorway. Ruth and Dorothy and several other girls, brought bouquets of flowers. Just before the driver started, a dishevelled little boy, hatless, and with a tear-stained face ran up to the car and handed Miss Lee a soiled envelope. It was Teddy Davis.

Everyone waved and called "Good-bye and good luck!" and Natalie waved back as best she could. When they were out of sight of the house Natalie asked Miss Lee to read her Teddy's letter.

Dear Nats:

When you come back you can have your place on the team if I have to kick A. Phillips off with my own hands.

Your pal,
Ted.

Natalie smiled to herself. It was sweet of Teddy, she thought, but she knew that whatever was in store for her, her tomboy days with the Gang were over.



CUZ-ZEN DICK

Chapter VI

WARD DELIVERANCE

Forever afterwards, whenever Natalie Harding saw a quantity of white tile, or smelled disinfectant or heard the plop-plop of rubber heels on a hard surface, something in her mind said "hospital."

It was so big and strange and impersonal a place! The tiled corridors seemed to stretch for endless miles. The quiet, white-clad people who scurried along them had no word for her. At first she felt terribly frightened and alone.

"The way to get along in a new or difficult situation," her father had once told her, "is to pretend

it isn't happening to *you* at all. Just play you are on the outside of yourself watching a show. Then, when you get used to it, slip back into your own skin and be yourself again."

Like most of Daddy's advice she had found this useful. It had worked wonderfully well the time she had skinned her arm from wrist to shoulder when she slid to second base during the Star Dusters' memorable game with the Katydids. It was then she gained her enviable reputation as the girl who never cried. The Star Dusters had boasted about her ever since.

Now she must try to imagine that she was someone else being admitted to a huge white hospital, even when they lifted her from the stretcher to the bed and it hurt so dreadfully. She kept on pretending as she surveyed her new home in the semi-private ward and the five little occupants with whom she was to share it. But saying good-bye to Leonora Hart, who was prohibited by hospital rules from nursing here, was quite another matter.

"I mustn't let these kids see me cry," Natalie whispered, as she held Miss Lee close. "But oh, Miss Lee, I don't know how to get along without you. Must you really leave me?"

Leonora Hart's eyes blurred. "Yes, I must, darling," she whispered huskily. "But as soon as you are able to leave the hospital, I'll come back and take

care of you and stay with you as long as you need me. Work hard and get well, dear."

So there was nothing else to be done. And being three years older than the eldest of the small patients in the ward, Natalie felt she should set them a good example. She and her father, in the usual Harding manner, christened the small patients The Five Little Cheepers because they sounded exactly like baby sparrows cheeping and chirping away about nothing at all the livelong day.

The Little Cheepers took Natalie to their hearts, very proud at having a big girl in their ward. They vied with one another for her favor, and soon were obeying her every word, much to the relief and delight of the harassed nurses in charge.

"I declare," the head nurse said to Natalie's father, "I don't know how we managed before Natalie came here. Ward D has become a different place. We used to say D stood for difficult, for they were the worst behaved youngsters in the whole hospital. But now they are good as gold."

"Good girl, Nats," her father said on his next visit. "Nurse tells me you've changed the name of Ward Difficult to Ward Delight!"

"Let's call it Ward Deliverance, Daddy," answered Natalie soberly.

They looked around the room at the little crippled people in their small, white beds, who in spite of

their suffering were able to laugh and play. And it was born afresh, in Donald Harding's mind, that human beings, little or big, are made of splendid stuff.

Natalie's favorite of all her roommates was Marujita, a small girl of eight, who was, as she explained, half South American and half North American. Marujita's father, who had married her beautiful mother while he was stationed in one of the Consular posts in Ecuador, was dead. And her mother had brought the child, suffering from infantile paralysis, to New York to have several operations performed so that she could walk properly. "I always limp-walk," she explained gravely to Natalie.

Each day at visiting hour, Marujita's beautiful, extravagant mother came sailing into the ward with a bag of forbidden goodies. She always managed to smuggle them in despite the watchful eyes of the nurse in charge. Marujita accepted the gifts and politely thanked her mother, then as soon as her mother left, turned the presents over to the nurse.

"I confiscated the first lot," the head nurse told Natalie. "But when I explained to Marujita that those sweet things would make it harder for her to get well, I never had to take them away by force again. She always calls me over and hands them to me without a murmur, although it is sometimes almost more than I can bear to do it. She looks at them so longingly."

"Why don't you tell her mother not to bring them?" Natalie asked.

"Oh, dear, we have, again and again. But she only shrugs her shoulders and promises, and next day brings an even more gaudy cake to add to the candy. Marujita said to me one day, 'Don't tell her no thing. I no eat. She like bring.' "

"Poor little kid!" said Natalie.

Marujita's efforts to "spik good the English" were a source of much amusement to Natalie. She promised to help the child, although she secretly hated to have Marujita lose her quaint speech.

One of Marujita's guests was a young man of twenty whom she called "my Cuz-zen Dick." At first Natalie thought him one of the most untidy young men she had ever seen, for his necktie was always askew, and he practically never remembered to wear either hat or gloves. She forgot her disapproval of him, however, when she saw how devoted he was to his funny little cousin. Every morning the nurse brought Marujita a letter from Dick. Marujita shared these letters with Natalie, and, indeed, she sometimes needed the older girl's help in understanding them. Apparently they were all part of a long, continued story which he was sending his little cousin, profusely illustrated with clever pen and ink drawings.

Natalie was glad when Dick came to see Marujita.

He was a very likeable young man, for all his careless appearance, with a friendly, outgoing manner and a joke for everyone. Soon he was including Natalie in his good-natured banter.

He seemed very much pleased when Natalie told him how much she was enjoying the illustrated story he was sending Marujita.

"I know a thing or two about drawing myself," she confided to him. "Enough to know what's good and what isn't, anyway."

While Marujita listened to this grown-up talk with wide-eyed wonder, Dick laughingly confessed that he was trying to learn to be a real artist and was attending art school at night as he had a full time job during the day.

"All of which hurries me some," he told Natalie.

After Natalie recovered from the ill effects of the long journey, she grew impatient to have the operation over and done with. She was secretly dreading it, more than she would ever admit. What were they going to do to her while she was lying there, asleep and unknowing?

As always with Natalie, it was the fear of the unknown that worried her and set her vivid imagination to work. So she asked Dr. Bill, whom she always remembered to call Dr. Rodgers with great respect, whenever he came into the ward, to tell her all about it. Seeing that he had a patient with an inquiring

mind, he brought charts and diagrams and explained in detail what was to be done. How the nurses shook their heads in disapproval at such unheard-of procedure!

"Natalie is taking a really scientific interest in her operation, Donald," Dr. Bill explained to Natalie's father. "No doubt I am breaking a lot of precedents in telling her the facts about it, but I think it's the right way to treat a girl like her."

"I agree," answered Donald Harding. "Natalie believes that it's what you *don't* know that *does* hurt you. She has always been like that."

One morning Natalie knew the time for the operation had come when two nurses appeared bearing strange-looking garments that made her think of an Eskimo's leggings. In these they encased her legs. She was wheeled off along the hall, with the cries of the Little Cheepers wishing her good luck ringing in her ears.

Her father was awaiting her by the elevator, which was to carry her up to the operating room. She smiled bravely at him although she had a strange, all-gone feeling inside her, very much like a bad case of stage fright mixed with homesickness.

"Here's a thought to take into ether-land with you, Nats," he said. "Look!" And he stretched out his hand for her to see. The bandage had been removed, and his scarred fingers were as straight as ever.

"Oh, Daddy, how wonderful!" Natalie cried. "now you will be able to draw again!"

"Indeed I will. And as soon as you get through the worst of this I must hustle back to Buffalo and take care of Minnie Mis-hap. I have been neglecting that young lady shamefully!"

They were riding up in the elevator together when Daddy leaned over and said, softly, "You are going to have a well back, just as I have a well hand, Nats. We'll both be straight and strong again. Believe that with all your might and main. Think about it when you go off to sleep and when you wake up. We'll all be waiting for you. Now then, Captain, eyes front. Forward march!"

"Aye, aye, sir," responded Natalie, and hoped her father had not noticed how her voice was shaking.

They wheeled her into a great white room with high ceilings and strong, bright lights. Figures clad in white from head to toe, with strange-looking masks over their noses and mouths, hurried about, solemn and important. One of the figures said cheerfully, "Good Morning, Natalie," and she realized that it was Dr. Bill, smiling at her as best he could with that queer-looking mask on his face.

Natalie smiled back and they chatted quietly while Natalie was lifted upon the table and Dr. Bill and another strange, masked figure bent over her.

Soon Natalie was very drowsy, very—ve-r-y

drooowsy, and the room was whirling and whirrrrrling and whirrrrrrrrrrrrling around and she was whirrrrrrrrrrrrrrling, too, on what seemed to be the spoke of a great wheel, whirrrrrr. . . .

After a long time she heard a voice say, "Hello, darling."

That sounded like Daddy, she thought, but she wasn't sure.

Then far away, oh, ever so far away, another voice said, "She did splendidly, Donald. She's still sleepy. You go and get some rest, and we'll call you when she wakes up."

"Why, it must be all over," Natalie thought to herself, "and I'm so sleepy!"

Long days followed. The longest, the quietest she had ever known. For awhile she was in a room of her own, far away from the disturbing noises of the Little Cheepers of Ward D. Natalie never had a very clear memory of those days that followed the operation. Sometimes it was as though she had been suspended in space, always drowsy and sleepy.

"I have so much sleeping to do," as she explained to her father apologetically, one day when he came to see her. But there were moments when the drowsiness left her, and sharp, white pain took possession of her, so that she was glad of the blessed medicine that made her sleepy again.

The day before she was to be moved back into the

ward something happened that made up in excitement for all the monotony of the other days. Just as her nurse had finished feeding Natalie her noonday broth, there was a knock on the door of her room, and three people looking rather mysterious but very happy, came filing in—her father, Aunt Bess, and Dr. Bill.

Natalie was wide enough awake to notice the new and most becoming hat that her aunt was wearing, and to stare in amazement at the white flower in the buttonhole of Dr. Bill's coat.

Aunt Bess bent down to kiss her. "Can you guess where we are going, Nats?" she whispered.

"Oh," cried Natalie, "are you—are you—I mean, is this the day?"

"Yes, Nats," said Dr. Bill. "We're on our way to the Little Church Around the Corner. I wish you could come along."

"We couldn't get married without your blessing, dear," said Aunt Bess.

"Gee, you've got that," Natalie answered. "And I'll sort of be there, too. In my thoughts, I mean. Come back and tell me all about it afterwards, will you?"

They promised, but when, an hour later, they returned to the hospital on their way up town to their new apartment, they found Natalie fast asleep. Aunt Bess unpinned her bridal bouquet and put it in water



It was the loveliest Christmas she had ever spent

on the table at Natalie's bedside, so that she would see it first thing when she awoke.

The Little Cheepers gave Natalie a regular home coming when she was moved back into the ward next day. They were doubly glad to have their Natalie back with them, for Christmas was almost at hand and they wanted to share it with her.

With a stiff cast all about her, Natalie could not, of course, take an active part, but in spite of that it was quite the strangest and loveliest Christmas she had ever spent. There was a tree of course, and there was Daddy, dressed up as a very portly St. Nick, completely deceiving all the Wardlets but Natalie as to his identity. Visiting hours were extended and greater laxity was enjoyed.

Such a strange assortment of people came to that Christmas celebration! Aunt Bess and Dr. Bill, who was now Natalie's uncle, Marujita's mother all dressed up in a black lace gown, with a red flower over one ear. Cuz-zen Dick came looking a little less untidy than usual. And the sisters and brothers and fathers and mothers of the other Wardlets, including even one little roly-poly grandmother.

"Do you suppose there really is a person hidden away among those sofa cushions?" Daddy whispered naughtily to Natalie.

But suddenly, in the midst of everything, the little sofa cushion began to sing, in a sweet, though slight-

ly quavering voice, that best of all Christmas songs, *Silent Night*. Only she, being a little German grandmother, sang it as *Stille Nacht*. After the first verse everyone joined in.

Truly a beautiful Christmas! Along came New Year's on the heels of Christmas. Long after the other little Wardlets had fallen asleep, Natalie listened to the roar of welcome with which New York City greets the New Year. Even along the hospital street the warning notices reading Zones of Silence were disregarded that one night of the year, and horns tooted and whistles shrieked. The boats on the East River took up the cry.

"What fun it will be, what fun to celebrate New Year's Eve in New York!" Natalie thought, "And I will, some day," she promised herself, "I really will!"

There were long days ahead after the holidays were over. Natalie needed all her fortitude to endure them. It was dreadfully tiring to lie flat on her back, always and always, with a great heavy cast around her. She and her father had tried to joke about her high board night gown. But it was no joke to be inside it, day in and day out.

As Daddy had returned to his work in Buffalo she saw him just during week ends. Aunt Bess came in often of course, now that she was living in New York. Even the faithful Dick called now and again, although his little cousin was no longer at the hospital, as she

had been moved to a convalescent home in the country.

Most of the time, however, she was alone with only the Little Cheepers for company. She was very fond of them of course, but sometimes she grew weary of their chatter and wished she had Teddy or Dorothy or Ruth to talk to. Most of all she wanted Miss Lee. How different were these days of recuperation from the lovely time she had spent with Miss Lee and Daddy at Harding Hall! And here she was, wasting her time, accomplishing nothing, while the world went on without her.

She confided her feelings to Aunt Bess. "These days are gone forever, Aunt Bess," she said, "and me doing nothing, getting nowhere. Why, I'll be a dumbbell when I get back to school. Everybody will be 'way ahead of me. I won't know anything! At home I could draw, at least, but here I can't do a thing!"

"But Natalie, that's absurd!" Aunt Bess answered. "Doing nothing? Why, you are getting well—the most important thing you can do. Still, my dear," Aunt Bess went on in a kinder tone, "nobody understands better than I how hard it is for an active, ambitious person to be idle."

She said no more at the time, but later, in her usual forthright manner, she made arrangements with the hospital authorities to allow Natalie to have a

tutor for two hours each day. A young man, much in need of extra money to complete his postgraduate work at Columbia, was found for the job. He was as eager a teacher as Natalie was a student, so they got on well. He wrote at once to Mr. Collins, principal of Natalie's high school for the proper assignments, and the two faithfully followed the work, week by week, which she would have been studying were she attending school.

What strange lessons they were, to be sure, with Natalie flat on her back, doing sums in her head; for she could hold neither a pencil nor a book! For the first time in her life, she said to her father, she was exercising her brains and finding it fun. So life was not so bad after all.

Sometimes at night she lay awake listening to the boats hooting in the East River. She had many day-dreams about those boats. In imagination she followed them to strange ports in the seven seas. Again and again her thoughts turned to the man-made port in Panama whose stories she had heard from Miss Lee. Would they ever take that promised trip?

Miss Lee was far away now, traveling with a sick old lady. But some day she would come back. She had promised to be there to help Natalie learn to walk again when she came out of her cast. Meanwhile Natalie must bide her time in patience until the great day of her deliverance should come.



AUNT BESS

Chapter VII

FIRST STEPS

Time has a remarkable way of passing if you just give it time enough, Natalie's father once said. And at last came the wonderful day when Natalie was to be released from the prison of her cast. Had the miracle happened? Oh, would she really be a whole girl again, able to move about like other people, to walk in the sun once more? Surely, surely after all the pain and waiting she had endured, this must come true!

With Daddy and Uncle Bill standing beside her and her nurse's arm supporting her, she took her first step. What a wobbly, uncertain feeling! It was

suddenly almost more effort than was worth while, but she gritted her teeth and valiantly stepped forth, putting her whole weight down on her own foot. She had won! That much at least had been accomplished, and the rest was sure to follow.

“Good girl!” said Uncle Bill. “I’m proud of you!”

Natalie smiled up into his face. “It’s you we should be proud of,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “Now I’m going to try the other foot. You know it’s like being a baby and knowing you are, all at once,” Natalie explained. “My mind knows that one foot comes after the other, but my feet seem to have forgotten it.”

“Just be glad that you haven’t a hundred feet to boss like the poor centipede in the poem,” her father said, encouragingly. “Do you remember him?”

‘A centipede was happy, until a frog in fun
Said, “Pray, which leg comes after which?”
Which put his mind in such a pitch
He lay distracted in a ditch
Considering how to run!’ ”

Natalie giggled and tried again. She felt clumsy, and so weak! And the floor seemed to come right up and hit her.

“That’s done it!” said Uncle Bill, as with tremendous effort, Natalie’s left foot followed her right. “There now, that’s enough for today. Tomorrow we’ll double the dose and let you take four steps, and

so on and so forth until we'll have you running a Marathon one of these days. You'll see!"

Uncle Bill sounded very happy, and Daddy looked radiant. Natalie felt sure her uncle would not have talked like that if the operation was not the success they had all wanted. Oh, it was, it was! But now she was tired and glad to obey orders and take a nap.

After her first great effort had been made, the nurses and Uncle Bill had a hard time persuading Natalie to go slow enough. She was determined to master the use of her long-idle muscles in the shortest possible time.

Each day had its little battle and its victory. "Now I know how Wellington felt at Waterloo," she told Uncle Bill the evening after she had taken a few steps unsupported by her nurse's arm. Then followed other victories. One afternoon she and her nurse walked out into the hall together to the tiled stairway, and Natalie Harding who had been bedridden for almost a year, who had lived in a cast unable to move anything but her head and arms—Natalie Harding walked up and down four stairs!

"And now you can come home with us," said Uncle Bill, who was as happy as could be over the success of the experiment. "You aren't to go back to Buffalo for a long time to come. I want you around where I can look after you. I'll bring you back to the hospital from time to time, to lie under the lamps

that will carry the health-giving rays of the sun clear into your insides to make them all well."

At last the day came when Natalie bade farewell to the people who had been so kind to her. She said good-bye to the brave Little Cheepers with a pang, for she had grown very fond of them.

Uncle Bill took her to the apartment on Riverside Drive, where Aunt Bess and Miss Lee were waiting for her. For Miss Lee had not forgotten her promise to help Natalie through the first difficult days.

It was wonderful having Miss Lee again! Their companionship, broken by the long months at the hospital, was resumed, as good as ever. Just as she had been a kindly, understanding nurse, so she became an encouraging, helpful bodyguard. For Natalie needed every encouragement. The operation had been a success, yes. But it was a long difficult road she must travel before she could manage her poor weak muscles again.

The windows of Natalie's room faced Riverside Drive which winds along the Hudson River. Sometimes Natalie wrapped herself in a blanket and sat at the window watching the early morning sunlight on the tall, lofty Palisades across the river. Or at night she watched the winking lights from the great electric signs, and the never-ending stream of cars and taxicabs rolling along the Drive.

Best of all, she liked to see the boats in the water—

fat ferry boats waddling across the river—tugs and barges, and as the weather got warm, slim graceful yachts. Once a fleet of battleships was anchored up the Hudson and the rays from their searchlights made a magical pattern across the night sky.

Not all of Natalie's enjoyment of that view came from an armchair by the window, however. Little by little she was permitted to make short excursions along the Drive on her own two feet. Crossing the street for the first time was a nightmare, in spite of the fact that Uncle Bill and Miss Lee flanked her on either side, each lending a supporting hand.

"I'll never be as scared of anything as that again," she said to Miss Lee, when they were safely back in Natalie's room. "There is one good thing about life. You can do a thing for the first time just once."

So each day Natalie added to her accomplishments, and each day she felt herself growing stronger, surer. Although she would feel stiff and clumsy for some time to come, so they told her, the miracle had happened and she was a whole girl again.

Her days were spent studying with her good tutor and exercising with Miss Lee, and passed very happily. Daddy came often from Buffalo to see her. And sometimes Cuz-zen Dick, her old friend from hospital days, came too. Poor Dick was not much improved in appearance. Indeed Aunt Bess, who was a stickler for propriety, looked at him askance. Once

she commented on his untidiness to Natalie, remarking that it was an old-fashioned idea that a man must look sloppy in order to convince the world that he is an artist.

"There's an occupation for your spare time, Nats," said Uncle Bill. "Along with learning how to walk and keeping up with your school work, why don't you set yourself up as sartorial advisor to young artists?"

"Poor old Dick," said Natalie. "It's a shame that he looks the way he does, for he is very nice and does awfully good work. I showed Daddy some of his sketches at the hospital one day and he said they really showed promise."

"Not very great praise, is it?" asked Uncle Bill.

"It is from Daddy," Natalie answered. "He says that many a good auto mechanic is ruined for life by some well-meaning person giving him lofty notions about becoming an artist. Besides the poor boy really doesn't have enough money to dress properly. He gets a very small salary, and spends all he can spare on drawing materials and lessons at the Art School."

"Well, Nats," said Uncle Bill, "I've no doubt that the young man is very worthy, but honestly, my dear, I find that a well-tied tie costs no more than a poorly tied one."

"And lasts much longer," put in Aunt Bess.

"I wish someone would take Dick in hand," Nata-

lie confessed. "He could be such a wonderful person. You two haven't any idea how nice he has been to me, how he has kidded me along to try to walk, when I wanted to give up, and how much fun he is."

As the days passed and Natalie's recovery was assured, Miss Lee left for Albany where she had been called to another case.

"I wish," said Natalie, "that I could always have you with me."

"But that would mean having you always sick, Nats dear, and you wouldn't like that," Miss Lee answered.

"That's true," said Natalie. "But I wish there were some other way. It's so hard to have you go."

"I'll always come back if you need me," Miss Lee promised once again.

One evening, not long after Miss Lee's departure, Daddy arrived unexpectedly from Buffalo. Apparently there was something important afoot, for he said he wanted to call a council of war. That sounded ominous, so the family got themselves comfortable in chairs in the living room and gave him their attention.

There was great news indeed. A group of men were organizing an advertising agency and wanted Donald Harding for their Art Director.

"Don't let that title give you any false ideas of my importance, though," Daddy confided. "I'll

probably be everything from office boy to traveling salesman for a year or two until we get on our feet. It is a co-operative venture. We are all going to put in what we can in the way of money and I want to put in full time and all the effort there is in me to make a go of it."

Daddy was looking very excited and happy. "Of course I can't take such a momentous step without consulting my partner about it," he said, smiling at Natalie. "You see," he said, turning to Bill Rodgers, "Natalie and I have been partners for ever so long. I have to be sure she agrees."

Of course when Natalie saw her father's enthusiasm there was nothing to do but agree, although she hoped it would not change their plans about going back to Buffalo.

"Where will your office be, Daddy?" she asked.

"At Buffalo where we know our way around," her father answered. "But as a matter of fact, I'll spend a good part of the time traveling to most of the large cities in the Middle West drumming up trade. And, honey, that's one of the things I want to talk to you about. Since I am to be away from Buffalo so much of the time, how would you like to stay here with Aunt Bess and Uncle Bill and go to school in New York City? I would try hard to get down to see you a couple of times a month, and you would have a happy home here, I am sure."

"We'd love to have you, Natalie," Aunt Bess said cordially and Uncle Bill smiled agreement.

"That's awfully nice of you both," Natalie answered. "Please don't think I'm not grateful. But Daddy, won't you be in Buffalo much more than in New York?"

"Yes, I expect to be there about half the time."

"Then let me come home and be with you," Natalie said. "We've been separated so much, with all these months at the hospital."

It pleased Donald Harding to have his daughter talk like that. He wanted to do the best he could for her no matter what the cost to himself, so it made him doubly happy to have her so evidently prefer his company to anything else.

"Besides," Natalie went on, "my tutor thinks that with all the extra work I have been doing, I'll have enough credits to enter the Senior Class this year. It would be fun to graduate back there at dear old Buffalo High where I've always lived. It feels like home to me there. Not that I don't like it here, Aunt Bess, and I think it's swell of you and Uncle Bill to want me. But—"

"That's all right, Natalie," Aunt Bess interrupted in a kindly tone. "But remember, if you ever get lonely and want to change your mind, just let me know. Whom will you get to look after Natalie, Donald?" she asked, turning to her brother.

"Why, I don't need anybody to look after me now!" exclaimed Natalie, indignantly. "We can get hold of Cindy again. She's always writing me asking me when I'm coming home, and she and Dad and I can get on all right, can't we, Dad?"

"I think so," Daddy agreed.

Aunt Bess was far from satisfied with this arrangement. "Really, Donald," she said, "I do think Natalie needs more companionship than Lucinda could give her, especially with you away so much. Don't you think you should get a housekeeper who would be more of a chaperone?"

"Cindy can be my chaperone, Aunt Bess. I'd lots rather have her than some strange person I don't know. As for companionship when Dad is away, what's the matter with the whole Gang and the rest of my friends in Buffalo? Besides, I'm old enough to take care of myself, now."

"I think she's right, Bess," said her husband. "These youngsters just will grow up, you know." Natalie flashed him a grateful smile.

"And don't forget the present exchequer won't allow for trimmings like chaperones," put in Daddy.

"Well," said Aunt Bess, reluctantly, "we will see. After all, if it doesn't work out we can always make other arrangements."

"Then three cheers for Natalie, the new mistress of Harding Hall!" cried Daddy.

"That's an awfully large house for you three to rattle around in," said Uncle Bill. "Why don't you sell it and get a little place more your size?"

"Heavens, Dad, you wouldn't do that, would you?" Natalie cried in alarm.

"No danger of that, I'm afraid. Nobody wants a white elephant like Harding Hall these cautious days. But I wish I could. Tell you what we'll do, Nats," he chuckled, "if this new advertising business doesn't work out, you and Cindy and I can run Harding Hall as a boarding house."

They all laughed. Then Natalie was struck with a thought. "Dad, if you take on this new work, what's to become of Minnie Mis-hap?"

"I was coming to that, Nats," her father answered soberly. "Honey, I hate to tell you this, I wish I could pretend that things are better than they are. But I won't go back on our family custom of talking the facts straight out. You have managed to stand hearing the truth in the past. And the truth is that somehow my fingers have lost their skill, in spite of the wonderful work Uncle Bill did to straighten them. If the editor had not decided to change Minnie into a Saturday night special instead of a daily, I don't know where we would be. I have had to do some pretty careful maneuvering with old sketches to get away with it. I can't draw Minnie or anything else as a matter of fact, well enough to go on with it. If I

didn't need every ounce of energy and imagination I have to put into my new work, I'd be tempted to try to find a young artist whom I could train to make the pictures, while I supplied the stories. But I haven't any time or imagination to spare. You see, dear, this new work has a real future, which Minnie Mis-hap no longer has, for me at any rate."

"We got along all right when I was working on Minnie," Natalie said, stubbornly. "Why can't I do it again?"

"Because you have better use for your time and energy, just as I have. You must concentrate on getting an education. Besides—" he stopped short, not wanting to hurt her.

"Oh, I know what you mean, Dad," Natalie said, contritely. "I'm too conceited for any use. I couldn't have carried on the strip if I hadn't used your old pictures and had you there every minute planning them and thinking up the plots. I am not really so dumb as to think I could do it alone."

"Have you tried to sell Minnie Mis-hap, Donald?" asked Uncle Bill.

"Yes, and with about the same results as trying to sell the house. No buyers. The editor says the strip needs new blood and enthusiasm, and I guess he's right. But most cartoonists like to make up their own comic characters. I'm afraid we will just have to drop her."

Natalie's father saw the distress in the girl's face at these words. He sensed something of her feeling. To him Minnie Mis-hap was already a thing of the past. The new work beckoned, stimulating and challenging. But to Natalie the comic strip represented the happy things of the past which she longed to hold. Poor Natalie! She felt as if the bottom were falling out of her world with her father casually talking about selling Harding Hall and abandoning Minnie Mis-hap practically in the same breath.

"Oh, darn it," said Natalie. "Why does everything nice always have to change?"

"I'm sorry, Nats dear," said her father. "But I don't know what else to do."

When she heard the tone in her father's voice Natalie was ashamed of her selfishness. "That's all right, Dad," she said. "I know there isn't anything else to be done about it."

"It's too bad Minnie Mis-hap isn't a boy," said Uncle Bill, not meaning to be unkind, but trying to amuse the family and get them over a difficult moment. "If she were, your friend Dick Frost might take snapshots of himself for the syndicate."

Aunt Bess and Daddy laughed, but Natalie said, gravely, "Oh, Uncle Bill, I wish you wouldn't always make so much fun of poor old Dick." She stopped suddenly. "Jiminy crickets, Uncle Bill, that's a swell idea!"

"What is?"

"To have Dick draw Minnie. Why Daddy, he's just the one. He has a real sense of the ridiculous, which is, as you always tell us, the first qualification for a comic artist. Wait a minute." She went into her room and came back with a hand full of papers. "Look here," she went on, "here's one I got the other day which he called Characters Seen in the Subway."

She spread the pages out before the family.

"By Jove," said Uncle Bill, "Look at this one." He held up a picture of a very fat woman, laden with bundles, trying to get through the turnstile in the subway station.

"See this," chuckled Aunt Bess, holding up a wrinkled but excruciatingly funny drawing of an elegantly attired young man, complete with spats and a monocle, whose coattails had been caught in the door of a moving train while he was left standing on the platform, apparently wondering what on earth had happened to him.

They were laughing uproariously over these pictures when Natalie produced another. "Here's one that's a joke on me. It's a tumble I took on Riverside Drive one day, when he and Miss Lee were helping me walk. He calls it First Steps. I fell down so unexpectedly that I pulled him along, too. Look at him."

Dick had not spared himself. He had made a

caricature of himself emphasizing all of his eccentricities.

"This is good stuff," pronounced Donald Harding. "I believe he has a real sense of the ridiculous."

Whereupon Natalie and Aunt Bess and Uncle Bill chanted solemnly, "The first qualification of a comic artist!"

"Hush, you folks," laughed Daddy. "I surrender! Well, Nats," he went on, "I'll interview your young protégé and we will see what can be done. If we can manage something with the paper there is no reason why he shouldn't try it out. You can give him a helping hand, Nats, and I'll spare him all the time I can until he gets launched on his own."

"Minnie can retire one of these days on the proceeds of a book entitled *Young Talent I Have Discovered*," remarked Uncle Bill.

Natalie was thinking ahead joyously. "If Dick does get that job, Daddy, he ought to live in Buffalo to be near the paper. He could have Aunt Bess's old room for a studio, except when you come to visit us of course, Aunt Bess. And he can be the first boarder of the Harding Hall Boarding House."

"That would hardly do," Aunt Bess began, her voice stern with disapproval. But Donald Harding shook his head at his sister.

"No, Nats," he said to his daughter. "Dick must stay here in New York and attend Art School seri-

ously. Now that Minnie appears just once a week it is no longer a full time job so he won't have to spend all his time over it. With his income from Minnie he can afford more comfort and take a full time course at his school."

"And he can hire a valet," suggested Uncle Bill with a naughty twinkle in his eye.





RUTH *and* DOROTHY

Chapter VIII

THE PARTY

Home again! How different Harding Hall looked when one observed it standing on one's own two feet, like a natcheral girl, as Cindy would say, instead of from the windows of an ambulance! Had she ever before really appreciated this quiet, friendly place, Natalie wondered? The September sunshine sent long shadows over the spacious lawns and made a pattern of light through the maple trees. And the old house seemed to stretch out welcoming arms to her. Her father could call it a white elephant that nobody wanted, if he liked. But to Natalie it was Home!

She wandered from room to room, and to her eyes the shabby, old-fashioned place was filled with beauty. Even her own room of which she had grown tired during the long months in bed, seemed attractive to her now. As she saw the prizes won at tennis and swimming, her pennants that adorned the walls, and the snowshoes crossed above the fireplace, she dared believe that her days of sports were not over, after all.

"Of course I'm still wobbly and about as limp as one of Cindy's dishrags," she told her father. "But maybe, maybe—oh, Daddy, I will get *all* right again, won't I?"

"I'm betting on it," Donald Harding answered. "Give you time enough and you'll be running circles around the Gang just as you used to do."

Before school opened, Natalie and Black Glory with Daddy's help, reorganized Harding Hall to fit the family's changed status. Sometimes her father had qualms about the whole arrangement, especially leaving so young a girl alone with only the faithful Lucinda for company. But Natalie seemed to be getting so much fun out of being mistress of Harding Hall that he hoped for the best and allowed her enthusiasm to quiet his fears.

What fun it was to go to school in a big classroom with other people again! Not that Natalie scorned the improvised school in the hospital ward. The

training she had received there in exercising her brains had stood her in good stead as her examinations proved. For, in spite of the wreck of the Bobolink, she had done two years' work in a year and a half and she was ready to enter the Senior Class.

School meant more than lessons. It meant friends—friends of her own age too, instead of babies like the Little Cheepers, and adults, nice and companionable though some of them were. Natalie had been looking forward so eagerly to seeing her old companions again, no longer in the role of a sick friend whom they must visit, but as an equal with whom they could share their activities.

Somehow things did not go as she had planned and dreamed them. The old Gang, long since dispersed, paid little attention to her. The boys felt themselves young men, now, and their athletics were confined to the school teams. They did not wish to be reminded of the old Star Dusters. As Hartley, the captain of the Gang expressed it, "Baseball in vacant lots is kid stuff."

Ruth and Dorothy were especially changed. Ruth met Natalie's reference to the Three A Club with all the disdain of sophisticated sixteen. That too, apparently was kid stuff, Natalie thought bitterly. Their vast ambitions were forgotten in the engrossing, immediate interests of clothes, good times and boys. Natalie tried to join in, for like every young person

the world over she wanted to "belong." Sometimes she wondered if being so much with older people or with children many years younger than herself had made her forget how to take her place among her contemporaries.

Often she wished she could talk it all over with Miss Lee! She tried to write her old friend of her disappointments and perplexities, but the words did not seem to say what she meant them to.

"Things seem very different, Miss Lee," Natalie wrote. "But that is the way of the world, I guess. And if old things have to go new ones will come along, just as nice, I am sure." She felt very adult in her new-found philosophy, but there were times when she found it slim comfort.

Natalie knew that she still appeared awkward, for occasionally she observed embarrassed looks on the faces of her friends. She felt so well, and each day her muscles seemed to grow more limber, that she was sure the remaining stiffness would wear itself away, the more things she did. All she needed was exercise. So, in spite of a few disappointments, she was finding it good to be alive and well, to be a real girl again.

In all this world of change two people remained steadfastly as she remembered them. One was Big Black Glory, as kind and jolly as ever, and bubbling over with joy at having her Natalie to take care of

again. And the other was her old pal, Teddy Davis. Of course his voice was deeper and his legs, clad in long trousers now, were longer. But he was her devoted slave as of old.

On the Block it was the same as it used to be. Teddy and Natalie were in and out of each other's houses as if there had been no passage of time. At school however, Teddy kept away from her, until he saw that no other boy paid any attention to her. Then he formed the habit of meeting her on the corner of the school block and solemnly escorting her home. Natalie knew she should be grateful for his loyalty. Certainly it was better than having no one. But she did wish Teddy were a little older.

When the time grew near for the first social affair of the school year, the Autumn Ball, Natalie was filled with apprehension. Would anyone ask her to go? What would she *do* if no one did? Before the accident she had been one of the most popular girls in the crowd, and was invited everywhere. It was unthinkable that she would be left out now.

Aunt Bess had sent her a lovely blue taffeta evening gown, her first grown-up dress. Natalie invited Ruth and Dorothy to drop in and see it the day it arrived from New York, all done up in a handsome box which bore the name of one of Manhattan's most exclusive dress shops. There was no doubt that the girls were impressed and not a little envious.

"Let's all three go to Irene's Beauty Shoppe the morning before the dance and get fixed up," suggested Dorothy.

"Yes, let's," Natalie agreed. "Just think, it will be the first time I have ever had my hair done at a place like that. All the time that you have been having waves and things, I've been in bed."

"Let's get manicures, too," said Ruth. She was feeling very pleased with herself, for Tom Drew, the captain of the football team and the most popular boy in the Senior Class, had asked her to go with him. She was a little dismayed, however, when she asked her chum Dorothy, who her escort was to be.

"My brother is bringing one of the men in his class at Cornell," answered Dorothy, trying to look unconcerned. Poor Ruth! Even the captain of the football team was no such catch as a college man!

"Who is taking you, Nats?" asked Ruth.

Natalie blushed crimson. "Why—I—I haven't decided yet who to go with," she stammered. The girls said nothing, but a look of understanding passed between them.

Two days before the dance, Teddy Davis came to see Natalie and rather sheepishly invited her to go with him. There was nothing else to do so she accepted, although it was humiliating to go with a Sophomore when all her classmates were going with Seniors.

When the great night came, however, and Teddy arrived to fetch her, looking very handsome in his first tuxedo, she had to confess that nobody could have had a more gallant escort. For he brought her a beautiful corsage of gardenias to wear, and, very proud and dignified, handed her into a hired limousine.

A lively orchestra was playing a popular air as Natalie and Teddy entered the ballroom of the big hotel. How gay the room looked, hung with school pennants and decorated with autumn foliage!

It promised to be a wonderful affair. Natalie knew she looked well. The hairdresser had made the most of her soft, brown hair, and her lovely gown which, as Lucinda said, "jes matches yo' eyes", was the smartest in the room. As the rhythm of the music took hold of her, the last vestige of self-consciousness vanished. Surely she was all right now. How wonderful to be going to a dance like other people!

Her joy was short-lived. It was several dances before she realized what was happening. No one was asking her to dance but Teddy!

"Am I doing so badly?" she asked herself in dismay. "Do I *look* lame, after all?" She could see Ruth and Dorothy and most of the girls she knew, going smilingly from one pair of boyish arms to another. "How mean they are," she thought, trying to hold back the tears, "and what a fool I was to come to this

place. Why did I think it would be any different on a dance floor from what it is at school?"

Her worry served to increase her stiffness. Poor Teddy, red-faced and perspiring, pulled her around as best he could, while he cast longing eyes at the stag line.

"I'm just a lump," Natalie told herself. "A clumsy, awkward lump!"

How long this torture continued she did not know. Miserable though she was, she would not give up, and Teddy, of course, had to stay with her. Dance after dance they took the floor together, but there was never a tap on Teddy's shoulder until—yes, there was!

A grinning face appeared out of the blur. Teddy breathed a sigh of relief, as he handed her over, and Natalie looked up gratefully into the face of—Arthur Phillips! Arthur Phillips, her old enemy. Was he gloating over her? Was that why he had done it? In her dismay she stumbled and all but fell. "I can pretend I've sprained my ankle," she thought miserably.

She excused herself and limped off the floor. For a long time she stayed alone in the cloak room. No one came near her. At last she crept into the foyer and hid behind a huge palm. She would wait there quietly for awhile and give Teddy a chance to dance with girls who *could* dance. Then she would send



"Now she's a cripple, she goes to a dance!"

for him and they would go home together, and never, never, as long as she lived, would she go to a dance again!

Her sorrowful meditations were broken into by the sound of talking. She heard Teddy's voice, pleading.

"Look here, you guys, give a fellow a break, won't you? Why don't you dance with her?"

"Say, listen," it was Hartley who answered, the captain of the old Gang. "What do you think this is, a dance or a—"

"Kangaroo walk," cut in the voice of Arthur Phillips. "One of the chaperones got after me. She's trying to round you all up to make you dance with 'poor little Natalie Harding.' Said I ought to do my duty. Well, boy scouts, I did my good deed for the day. How about the rest of you?" There were several guffaws.

"Aw, but say," Teddy's voice all but begged, "be decent to the poor kid!"

"Listen, fella," answered Arthur. "That girl ought to get wise to herself. She's always butting in where she doesn't belong. When she was a kid she wanted to play ball like a boy. Now she's a cripple, she goes to a dance!"

"Darn you, Arthur Phillips," Teddy was a brave youngster to stand up to a boy two years older than himself. "We all wanted her to play with us when

we were little. And I guess I asked her to come to this dance. She's as good as your girls, any day."

Natalie's eyes blurred. Poor loyal little Teddy! She wished it didn't make her so mad to have him defending her like this. At length the young men went back to the ballroom, and Natalie quietly slipped into the cloak room, got her wrap from the attendant and went to the front door of the hotel. The doorman called a taxicab for her and soon, more desolate and unhappy than she ever knew she could be, she was rolling along the streets to her home.

"I suppose it was mean of me to walk out on Teddy like that," she said to herself as the cab pulled up at the door of Harding Hall. "But he is probably a lot better off without me. Now he can have a good time."

Natalie was glad that Daddy was away and that she could pretend a headache to Cindy, who, seeing her tear-stained face, wisely asked no questions. After Natalie had crept into bed the faithful Lucinda, her black face puckered with worry, brought the girl a cup of steaming cocoa.

"Drink this, chile," said the thoughtful old woman. "Then you'll git to sleep and feel better."

But Natalie lay awake for a long time, living over the unhappy evening and wondering how she could have been so stupid as to think she could take her place in her old world again. It would have been bet-

ter, perhaps, if she had never gone to the hospital, she thought sadly, better if she had never had the beautiful dream that she could be cured and live like other girls again. Well, she knew better now, she told herself. She would never be so foolish as to make *that* mistake again. Her body shook with sobs when she remembered how happy they had all been at the hospital and how hopeful on that wonderful day when she had taken her first step.

As she sipped the cocoa she decided to change all her plans. She would bury forever the Natalie Harding who had played tennis matches and won swimming contests. And, while others wasted their time on such foolish, useless things as dances, she would do what they all were there for—study. And she would certainly keep herself to herself from now on. When she met any of her so-called friends, she would speak to them politely and pass on. She was through with them forever.

Next morning she folded up her evening dress and together with her cups and trophies, won in those far-away days before the accident, packed it away in the depths of an old trunk in the attic. Hidden away there she would forget them. Then she made a bundle of her pictures and pennants and dispatched them to Ward D back at the hospital. And with Cindy's help, she moved the huge, cumbersome dictionary from the library up to her room, and filled her book-

shelves with her father's editions of the classics and other equally serious-looking volumes.

"From now on, Lucinda," she remarked sternly, "I'm going to spend my time in worth-while ways. No more kid stuff for me! Dances and such things are a foolish waste of time, and I don't like them, anyway." But her voice shook when she said it, and she fooled no one, not even herself.





Chapter IX

TOURISTS ACCOMMODATED

The faithful Lucinda studied and studied over the problem of what to do about Natalie, as she anxiously watched the quiet, pale-faced girl who had replaced the gay, fun-loving one.

"Why don't you git up and git with the other chillun no more?" Cindy asked one golden October afternoon, as she saw Natalie hunched over her books in the library.

"I am no longer a child and do not wish to act like one," Natalie replied severely.

For Natalie was keeping the vow she had made to herself in the hours of heartache that followed the Ball. She was making herself over into a serious student. She took a rather grim pride, not only in getting higher marks than the rest of the old Gang, but in learning more about a subject than the textbook told. She spent hours poring over her father's encyclopedia, and her excursions outside the house were only to the reference room of the public library.

All work and no play was making Jill a dull girl however, and oh, such a lonely one. It was not much fun being merely a good student, while all her old friends went their ways without her, busy with the games and parties that make up a big part of school life. In truth, Natalie was being left severely alone; at first because the boys and girls were embarrassed and ashamed of their treatment of her at the Autumn Ball, and later because her continued aloofness, prompted though it was by fear of more hurt, drove them away when they did make halting overtures of friendship.

No one but Teddy came to see her. The first time they met after the night of the Ball, Natalie apologized for leaving him in so unceremonious a fashion. Teddy, guessing that she had overheard the boys talking about her, tactlessly asked her if this were true. And he foolishly reported to Natalie his attempts to settle accounts with Arthur Phillips. The

older boy had laughed at him and said scornfully that he "wouldn't fight with a kid."

Poor Teddy! Small thanks Natalie accorded him for his chivalry!

"If you would all leave me alone, one and all," she said, "I'd be better off." So, badly hurt by her attitude, for awhile even Teddy stayed away.

Having pretended that she had sprained her ankle on the dance floor, Natalie was forced to limp at school for the next week or so in order to keep up the fiction. Begun as an excuse, it continued as a habit, helped as it was by the stiffness of her body. No longer did she practice the exercises she had been given when she first left the hospital. She stopped consciously trying to improve her posture, and slid into careless habits of sitting and standing. The limp grew steadily worse. Once so lithe and straight, Natalie became round-shouldered and almost dumpy, and because the well-meaning Lucinda knew only one cure for a girl's heartache—cake and candy—Natalie's rosy complexion grew pasty.

Cindy had no one to whom she could turn for advice. Aunt Bess was far away in New York. Miss Lee, who had always been such an approachable person in the household, was on a case in Albany. And Donald Harding was so seldom at home and so preoccupied with business affairs when he was there, that Cindy dared not speak to him.

Natalie had warned Cindy that, whatever happened, her father was not to be worried by the affairs of Harding Hall. When she asked about his new work, her father put her off, but she knew the venture was not going well and that he was practicing all sorts of economies.

"Don't you see, Cindy," Natalie said, "it's up to us to keep our troubles away from Dad and give him a cheerful place to come home to when he does come home?"

So the colored woman, child herself, entered into the spirit of the thing, and Donald Harding never guessed that things were not what they seemed. As a result he did not propose to Natalie, as he sometimes wished to do, that she accept her aunt's offer to live in New York City. It was proving more and more difficult for him to get back to Buffalo. The original plan that he should spend about half the time there had not worked out, for the other members of the new firm had soon discovered that Donald Harding was more successful than the rest of them at securing now advertising accounts. They therefore sent him farther afield.

It would have been a great help to him, financially, if he could have been relieved of the expense of the Buffalo home. But he had not the heart to ask it of Natalie, so convinced was he that she was happy, and that spending her Senior year at school in her own

home town, meant much to her. Of course, had he been oftener at home and less engrossed in business worries when he was there, he would have observed the true state of affairs. As it was, Natalie put on, as he afterwards expressed it, "a mighty convincing show."

"She has had a terribly hard time of it, poor little girl," Donald Harding said to himself, grimly, "And I'm going to give her what she wants, no matter what it costs!"

So each went his way, heavy-hearted and worried, but convinced that each was doing what the other most wanted. What had become of the old frank comradeship between them?

They had hoped to have the Thanksgiving weekend together, but business took Natalie's father west again, so that all he could manage was the night of Thanksgiving itself.

"Don't stay home on my account if there is a party you want to attend," he wrote Natalie. "I'll stay up for you." Natalie smiled ruefully at his suggestion that she might be going to a party. But when he came home, they feasted on one of Lucinda's luscious meals, and Natalie gave no hint to her father that all was not well.

"Let's go sort of easy on Christmas presents this year, Nats," her father said. "One of these days, when our ship comes in, we will make up for it."

It was that request which showed Natalie more clearly than before the state of her father's financial affairs, for he had always been such a child about celebrating Christmas and birthdays, buying lavishly for his dearly loved daughter.

After her father left, Natalie and Lucinda had a talk—a conference—Natalie called it.

"See here, Cindy," Natalie said. "We have all these empty rooms. Why can't we turn this house into a Tourist Home and rent out rooms to motorists passing through Buffalo? Now that they have built the new highway so close to our house, I am sure we would get some trade. I'll help do the work, Cindy. I'll make the beds and dust. Maybe if we are careful, we can support ourselves and take some of the burden off Daddy's shoulders."

"What will your pappy say, chile?" Cindy asked. "Maybe he don' like for you to do it."

"Nonsense!" retorted Natalie. "He doesn't have to know about it. We can take the sign down when he comes home. He always lets us know in advance when to expect him. Come on, let's do it!"

"Mebbe the rest of the folks on the Block will 'ject," suggested Cindy.

"Well, let 'em," Natalie's eyes blazed. "A lot I care what they think! It's none of their business anyway. Our house is on the corner, so why should they care. Of course," she went on in a less violent

tone, "I'll ask Teddy to speak to his mother. If *they* really minded, I wouldn't do it, I suppose."

Teddy was delighted at any excuse to make friends with Natalie again and eagerly invited her to his house to talk it all over with his mother.

"I've often thought of doing this very thing myself, Natalie," Mrs. Davis said, when Natalie had solemnly laid the scheme before her. "And you've stolen a march on me. Good for you! It really is absurd for small families like ourselves to be living in such large houses, when we have so much room to spare. Teddy and I will help you get started," she went on, secretly thinking that she would keep an eye on the people who came to rent Natalie's rooms.

"Thanks a lot, Mrs. Davis," Natalie answered. "Cindy and I will send you our overflow!"

"What has your father to say about it?" Mrs. Davis asked.

"I'm not going to tell him about it until I see how it works out," Natalie answered. Then, seeing the concern on the older woman's face, she went on, quickly, "Oh, please don't say anything to him. He has so much on his mind now. It isn't really deceiving him—I wouldn't do that, you know that. But things aren't going very well for him, and I want to help out. Please, please, Mrs. Davis!"

With some misgivings, Mrs. Davis promised. She had not seen very much of Natalie since the girl's

return from Buffalo, which was, of course, natural enough, now that the difference in Teddy's age and Natalie's was more apparent. But she had seen enough to know that the girl was lonely. Perhaps this Tourist Home plan would give Natalie just the interest she needed.

"Now we must put up a sign," said Natalie, and she and Teddy went hunting in the attic for the old sign which Natalie had made so long ago for Aunt Bess' homecoming. On the opposite side from Welcome Home, Natalie neatly painted—Tourists Accommodated. With Cindy's help they cleared out the old spare room, and Aunt Bess' room, and made a bed-sitting room of the unused front parlor.

"If we ever have a crowd I can put someone in my room, too," said Natalie. "And I'll use Dad's."

Natalie felt like a full-fledged business woman. She bought a tin cash box and an account book. She was going to know how they stood on this thing, not just make a guess at it. Teddy had the brilliant idea of telling the near-by garages and filling stations about Natalie's enterprise, so that they would send customers. He also had a small printing press on which he made a few cards to be distributed around town. They read:

"MISS NATALIE HARDING
TOURISTS ACCOMMODATED
COMFORTABLE BEDS CLEAN, AIRY ROOMS
BREAKFASTS OPTIONAL
122 MAPLE STREET BUFFALO, NEW YORK."

In spite of the fact that the tourist home was opened in the midst of winter when there were comparatively few tourists on the road, the venture met with some success. The tourists were delighted with the comfort and cleanliness of the place and loud in their acclaim when they sampled the optional breakfasts.

“Look out, young woman, or somebody will steal your cook,” exclaimed one jovial gentleman, when Cindy placed a plate of waffles, crisp and light as eiderdown, before him. “And see here, take a tip from me. I’ve been traveling over this territory for seven years and I know what I’m talking about. Don’t sell these wonderful breakfast of yours so cheap. You’re much too generous. I’d gladly pay twice as much as you’re asking. Why don’t you run three kinds? First, coffee, fruit and toast for ladies on a diet, then a little more food for a little more money for the second choice, and third, one of these banquets with all the trimmings for fellows like me who have quit caring how big their waistlines grow?”

Natalie was grateful for the suggestion. So Teddy went to work on the printing press again and printed three styles of menus. Before long, Natalie and Cindy were making enough money to pay the Harding grocery bill and a little over toward light and coal. It was not much, of course, but Natalie knew it would help.

Of the good and loyal work which Mrs. Davis did on her behalf, she never knew. As Cindy had predicted, some of the families on the Block objected to the cheapening effect on the neighborhood of a tourist home. But Mrs. Davis' tact soon won them over, especially as she pointed out that the neighborhood was changing, and that their Block, once a quiet byway on the outskirts of town, was being crowded out by business and apartment houses. The older people realized that its days as a residential neighborhood were numbered, and many of them, like Donald Harding, were trying to dispose of their places. Teddy settled scores with two of the Block's youthful objectors, and, between them, the mother and son kept Natalie's venture free from outside interference.

Christmas vacation was soon to come and Natalie had received an invitation from Uncle Bill and Aunt Bess to spend the holidays with them. She was sorely tempted to go. It would be wonderful to get away from Buffalo and have some fun for a change, but she did not want to leave her business now that it was going so well, and, besides, she wanted to put off as long as possible the day when her doctor uncle looked her over. She could not bear to have him see how stiff she had grown after all his hard work and care to make her well. So, very reluctantly, she refused on the grounds that she expected to be so busy.

The Rodgers never guessed the real reason for her

refusal and assumed that Natalie did not wish to miss the holiday parties of Buffalo's younger set. Indeed they were delighted that their young niece had so much to do!

It was a blow that Daddy could not come home either, although he had suggested a wonderful plan. "Instead of our buying presents for each other, let's meet in Chicago and have a party, just you and me," he wrote. "I have to be in Omaha the day before Christmas and in Minneapolis the day after. Chicago will be a splendid port of call. How about it?"

Natalie happily agreed. She determined that she would confess all about the Tourist Home to her father some time during Christmas Day. But the right moment to break the news never seemed to present itself. She did not want to interrupt their Christmas dinner by telling him something that might worry him, nor distract his attention from the matinee they attended afterwards. And first thing she knew, their day together was over and she had not disclosed her secret.

Just before they separated he told her about a trip to the Far West that the firm wanted him to take which would keep him away from Buffalo for at least six weeks.

"I'm worried about leaving you there so long by yourself, darling," he said. "But if you really are getting along all right, it will be a big help to me.

Maybe after this trip, things will quiet down for me and I'll know how we are going to stand. I've asked to have charge of a central branch of the business so I won't have to travel so much, and we'll pick out a nice town to live in. But it won't be Buffalo. Would you mind very much?"

Natalie assured him that she certainly would not mind, and he answered, "I can always count on you, my dear, I see that." How could she possibly bring up anything that might worry him after that?

"This trip will either make or break the new business, I believe, Nats," her father said. "So wish me luck."

As he put her on the train she said, "Remember last Christmas, and the sofa cushion that sang?"

Daddy laughed. "We seem to specialize in strange ways of celebrating Christmas, don't we, dear?"

"Well," answered Natalie, as she kissed him good-bye, "It's the best day in the year, no matter how we celebrate it."

When Natalie returned to Buffalo and found that her Tourist Home had done a splendid business over the holiday, she thought how fortunate a thing it was that her father had been unable to come home. Then a qualm, so intense that it was almost a physical pain, smote her. Was she deceiving him—her darling, trusting dad? She could not bear such a thought.

"It's strange that he doesn't know about it," she thought. "Funny that somebody doesn't write to him or at least to Aunt Bess about it. It's a lucky thing for me that precious Arthur Phillips and his family moved away from the Block, before I began the business. Mrs. Phillips would have been sure to tell Aunt Bess."

Natalie decided that she could stand this secrecy no longer. She would write to her father at once and make a clean breast of it. She was sure he would understand—why it was exactly the sort of thing he would have done in her place, she said to console herself.

Just as she was about to write the letter, however, Teddy came in one door with a handful of new menus which he had just printed and Cindy in another with a large chocolate layer cake for Natalie to sample.

As Cindy left the room, Natalie heard one of her "lady tourists" speaking to her. "Do I settle my bill with you or the little lame girl?" the woman asked.

"Miss Harding am in the dining room. You pays her," Cindy responded with dignity.

Natalie's cheeks were crimson when the stranger came into the room. "I'll send you all the people I can, dear," the woman gushed, as she paid Natalie. "I think you are a very brave little lady to do so much, and I want to help you all I can."

The old tomboy temper had not departed entirely, however, from the character of Natalie Harding. "Don't you dare come here because you are sorry for me," she cried, her eyes blazing, "You come because it's a clean place and the best food north of the Mason and Dixon line and you know it!"

"Aw, Nats, don't get sore at people like that," remonstrated Teddy after the startled woman had hastily withdrawn. "You never used to act this way."

"Well," said Natalie, who was beginning to be a little bit ashamed of her outburst, "I wish people had the decency to keep their remarks to themselves."

"She didn't mean any harm," Teddy replied. "Gee, Nats, you're getting awful touchy."

"Maybe I am and you know what you can do about it if you don't like it, Teddy Davis," Natalie answered flippantly. Then, seeing Teddy's crestfallen face, she relented. "Here, have a hunk of Cindy's cake and quit worrying about me."

"No thanks," said Teddy, "I'm in training."

"At this time of year? What on earth for? Football is over and baseball's not begun."

"Well, the coach wants a slick team this year and he asked some of us to come out early. When he looked me over he said I was getting too fat and advised me to cut out starches and sweets. Sounds crazy, I know, but gee, Nats, there's a chance for me to make the team this year and—"



"Why, Cuz-zen Dick!" cried Natalie

“Okay,” said Natalie, icily. “The more for me,” and she took a large bite. “Glad I don’t have to bother about that fool stuff anymore.” And even Teddy knew she wasn’t telling the truth.

There was a ring at the door. “Maybe it’s another customer,” said Natalie. “Excuse me.”

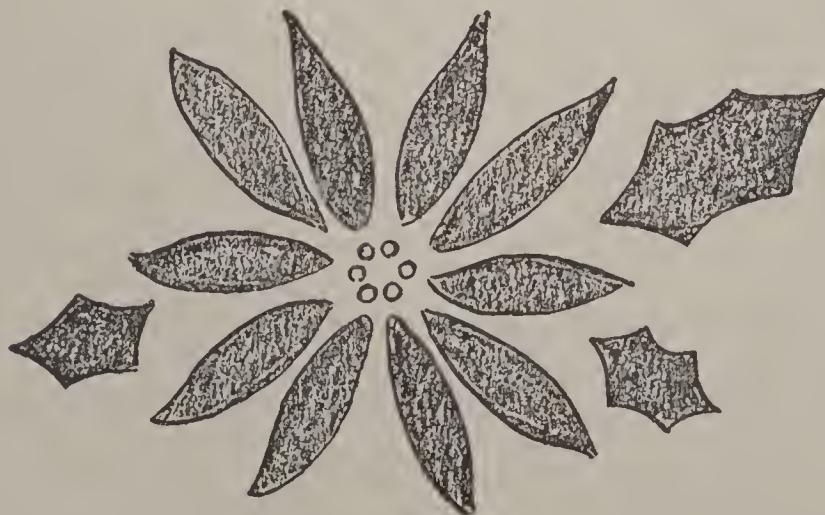
She limped to the door and opened it to find a young man muffled to the eyebrows with a large woolen scarf.

“Do you take in tourists here?” asked a gruff voice, which somehow sounded vaguely familiar.

“Yes, sir,” answered Natalie, in her most crisp and business-like tone. “Single or double? My terms are—”

“Okay, Nats,” the voice was no longer gruff and now it was perfectly familiar.

“Why Cuz-zen Dick!” cried Natalie. “Oh, do come in! How perfectly swell to see you!”





Chapter X

THE PLAIN UNVARNISHED TRUTH

"Who is the nice kid?" asked Dick, after Teddy had made his departure. They were seated at the dining room table consuming large pieces of Cindy's delicious cake washed down with draughts of cocoa.

"That's Teddy Davis, the boy next door," answered Natalie, and, in her heart she added, "The only friend I have in Buffalo." Aloud she said, "Teddy has been helping me with my Tourist Home."

"This tourist home business was something of a shock to me, Nats," Dick confessed. "Of course I couldn't resist the temptation of pretending to be a

customer when I saw the sign on the door. Tell me, how did you happen to go in for such a thing?"

"Well, you see, Cindy and I are here all alone most of the time and I got to thinking how silly it is for all this room to go to waste, and Daddy having to pay Cindy wages just to cook for me. And—well—I guess Dad's new business isn't paying him very much, not right at first, although I am sure it will soon. And Dad doesn't manage to get home very often, you see, and, oh, I don't know, Dick—it just seemed sort of sensible. Dad's going to get an awful shock when there aren't any grocery bills this month. Just think, we've made expenses!"

"So your father doesn't know about this, eh?" said Dick. "Don't you think you should tell him? Of course I can understand your not telling your aunt. I'm sure she would say that running a tourist home just 'isn't done' by a young lady." Dick made a wry face. "I don't mean to be rude about your relatives, Nats," he said, contritely. "It's just that that lady scares me cross-eyed. But honestly I think you ought to tell your dad. He'd be a good sport about it, I'm sure, unless—" Dick hesitated.

"Unless what?" prompted Natalie.

"Well, unless you are doing too much for your health. You don't look so hot, Natalie. How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right. Honestly I am. And running this

place is a lot better than doing nothing. It's pretty lonesome here with Dad away all the time. You see, when we made this plan of keeping house together we thought Daddy would be home much more of the time than it has turned out that he is. That's why I came back to Buffalo."

"Well, I expect you have all your old friends to keep you company," said Dick.

"Oh, yes, sure," said Natalie, hastily. They paused to do justice to Cindy's cookery and for a moment Natalie was tempted to take her good friend into her confidence and tell him the whole story, beginning with the unhappy night of the Autumn Ball. But no, kind and understanding as Dick undoubtedly was, he was a boy after all. He could not possibly understand what it meant to a girl to be unpopular and a wall-flower. So the moment passed and she asked Dick instead what he was doing in Buffalo.

"It looks as if I'm going to have a break with the paper, Nats," the boy answered, eagerly. "I owe my start to your dad, of course, but the editor seems to like my stuff. He asked me if I thought I could do a strip for kids to appear daily as well as the Saturday night cartoon of Minnie. I sent him some of those old things I used to draw for Marujita at the hospital, remember? Of course I fixed 'em up a little."

"Why, Dick, that's great! You'll be rich!"

"Not so fast," answered Dick with a laugh. "The

editor isn't throwing his money away. He keeps reminding me of my youth and inexperience if I ever dare stick out my head and ask for a raise. But of course it will mean *some* more money. By the way, he keeps trying to get me to move to Buffalo, so he can keep me under his eye!"

"And will you?" Natalie asked, hopefully.

"No sir—ma'am!" said Dick, emphatically. "I'm really getting somewhere at Art School this term, Nats, now that I have time enough and all the energy I used to waste on that errand boy job. And I wouldn't give up Art School now for a dozen jobs in Buffalo!"

"But with Art School and Minnie Mis-hap, will you have time for this new strip, too?"

"I'm not worried about the new strip," answered Dick. "I've been doing stuff like that all my life and I've got a stack of sketch books full of stories, just like your kid diaries you told me about. But Minnie has me worried. I can do the drawings easily enough. Nothing to it. But it's the plots, or incidents, as the editor calls them. That's my weak spot. The editor never lets me forget how my predecessor was never at a loss for an idea for an amusing incident," and Dick mimicked the editor's voice and manner.

"Of course, Nats," he went on, "your Dad passed on a lot of ideas for Minnie to me when I first took over the strip, so as to help me get started. But they

are all gone now, as well as some ideas of my own. Say look here. How would you like to work for me? You used to help your Dad with Minnie, I know. I'd pay you for every idea I could use. It would be much more pleasant work than running a rooming house, I should think, and more your style."

"I wish I could, Dick," Natalie answered, "although I don't think you ought to pay me for it. But honestly, I don't seem to be thinking about Minnie anymore, let alone drawing anything. I've been studying rather hard since I got back. You see, if I pass my midyears with high marks I might have credits enough to graduate. Then maybe I wouldn't have to stick around here until June."

"But I thought you were so set on coming back to Buffalo for your whole last year," Dick exclaimed in astonishment.

"Well," said Natalie, trying to keep her lip from quivering, "I was wrong." Fearing that Dick might ask her to explain what she meant, she quickly changed the subject, and gave him a sprightly account of the trials and tribulations she and Cindy had endured getting their Tourist Home started.

As they talked, the two friends sized each other up. "He isn't quite so untidy as he used to be," Natalie thought to herself. "But oh, I wish he would tie his tie straight, once in awhile. He is so nice, I wish I dared tell him."

And Dick was thinking, "What's come over the kid? She seems so sad. And she used to be so pretty. Wonder why she limps so much — why, she was straighter than this when she first came out of the hospital."

Dick made Natalie's Tourist Home his headquarters during his stay in Buffalo. Natalie was glad that his visit coincided with her Christmas holidays, for it enabled them to spend a great deal of time together. It was great fun having a companionable artist person around the house again. Dick had something of the spontaneous, eager manner that made her father such a splendid pal. When an idea for a sketch popped into his head, nothing would do but that he must translate the thought to paper, then and there. Cindy took care to have a scratch pad always at hand for this impetuous young man, even at meal times, for Dick was no respecter of tablecloths.

With Minnie Mis-hap again a member of the household, so to speak, Natalie found her thoughts turning to the old character, after all. One morning, while Dick was scowling over his drawings in the library, Cindy, with Natalie's help, was cleaning one of the bedrooms in readiness for a customer. Cindy never did things by halves. She had lifted up the mattress in her strong black arms to turn it over, when her foot slipped, and down she fell, sprawled flat on the mattress. Natalie had a hard time keeping

a straight face. But after a thorough examination proved to Cindy that no bones were broken, she joined in the laughter. Hearing the commotion, Dick came upstairs, three steps at a time, to see what had happened.

"Dick," cried Natalie, eagerly, "I've got it! Let's have Minnie run a tourist home!"

"Atta girl!" Dick shouted. "It's good for a series lasting weeks. My headaches are over!" He caught Natalie around the waist to dance a jig with her over her brilliant idea. Smiling, she took one step with him. Then she remembered. She coldly withdrew and limped out of the room.

"You mustn't be so rambunctious, Mister Dick," said Cindy, severely. "Poor little girl!"

The incident put ideas into Dick's head. And that afternoon, when he persuaded Natalie to go with him to Buffalo's beautiful art gallery, his suspicions were confirmed. For he noticed that while Natalie was going from picture to picture, engrossed and interested in the beautiful treasures, she scarcely limped at all. Was that limp a pose, he wondered? Did Natalie consciously put it on? "Darn it all," he said to himself, "I wish I knew what's wrong with her! Maybe if I can find out I can make her snap out of it."

Strange, he thought, that her father and aunt and uncle left her alone, rattling around in that old house with nobody but a colored woman for company. And

she seemed to have no friends at all except the boy next door. Where were all the others that Natalie used to be so enthusiastic about when she was in New York? Somebody ought to do something.

Should he, Dick Frost, write her father about it? No, you couldn't just write to a man and say, "Dear Mr. Harding, your daughter is a mess. Why doesn't somebody take care of her?" Should he tell her aunt about it when he returned to New York? No thanks! But the doctor, Natalie's uncle, he seemed a good sort. "But maybe I'm wrong," he told himself. "Maybe after an operation like that a girl would always be stiff and awkward. Anyway the doctor would wonder where I got off telling him his business." So ran Dick's thoughts.

"No," he decided. "It's up to me, and I'd rather take a licking than hurt the poor kid's feelings, but somebody's got to shame her into doing something for herself. How in the name of Pete, Mike and Jehosophat shall I go about it?"

As they went home from the gallery, Natalie herself gave Dick the opportunity to learn more about the situation. She was asking him how her little friend of hospital days, his small cousin, Marujita, was getting on.

"Fine!" Dick replied, happily. "No more 'limp-walk.' You know, Nats, that kid is a wonder. They told her at the hospital that the only way she could

get straight and strong was to do some exercises that they gave her, every day. And she does them too, no matter how tired she is. If her mother had her way, Marujita would sit on a cushion doing nothing, all day long. Did they give you any exercises when you left the hospital, Nats?" he asked innocently.

"Yes," answered Natalie, coldly. "They did, but the exercises were no good. I have given them up."

So Dick decided to try an experiment. They had returned from the gallery and were waiting for Cindy to serve them supper. Natalie went up to her room and Dick was lolling around downstairs. Suddenly Natalie heard a crash, followed by a thud, as though some heavy body had fallen — then a loud moan. Natalie came running down the stairs. *Running!* There stretched on a rug before the fireplace was Richard Frost, his eyes closed, his mouth twitching with pain, and a blood-stained handkerchief clasped against his forehead!

"Oh, Dick, dear, dear Dick, are you hurt?" she cried.

Before her startled eyes, the figure on the rug calmly got to his feet, and wiped the bloodstains from his forehead.

"One of your customers conveniently left some lipstick behind," he said. "Very thoughtful of her. It helped my act."

Natalie was quivering with anger. "I suppose that's

your idea of a joke,” she said, her voice breaking. “To scare me out of my wits like that. Well, if that’s the case, you have a rotten sense of humor.” She burst into tears.

But Dick paid no attention to her outburst. “No, it wasn’t a joke,” he replied sternly. “It was a test, and I’ve proved my theory.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” demanded Natalie, her voice still shaken with sobs.

“I’m talking about you, Natalie.” Dick crossed the room and put his hands on her shoulders. “This morning when you and Cindy were cleaning the room and this afternoon at the Art Gallery, I noticed that you didn’t limp, when you forgot to. Do you know what I made you do by my fake accident? I made you run! *You ran* all the way downstairs, not at all like the poor little lame girl you pretend to be. I don’t know what your game is, or why you do it, but it’s a silly idea if you ask me, and I’d quit it if I were you.”

Natalie shook his hands from her shoulders. “And you did that to me, you scared the life out of me, making me think you were badly hurt, maybe killed, for a reason like that? Oh, I hate you, I hate you!”

“No you don’t, and you’re going to listen to me, Natalie, while I tell you the plain, unvarnished truth. Something has happened to you—you’re not the girl you used to be—not that swell, brave kid that came

out of the hospital and tried so hard to walk. Now, look at you. You don't take the exercises that your uncle gave you to make you stand straight. You fill yourself up with candy and cake—why you could start a bakery with the amount of cake you tuck away in one day. I've watched you! You never fix yourself up and go anywhere or do anything. You just mope around this joint all day long. And you're even getting fat!"

"Is that so?" Natalie retorted. "I suppose the fact that I'm getting grand marks at school means that I'm no good. The teachers just give them to me for doing nothing. Oh, yes! I suppose the fact that Cindy and I are making money out of this house means that I do nothing but twiddle my thumbs and eat cake all day. Well now, I'll tell *you* something, Mr. Richard Frost, I'll tell you a few of your plain, unvarnished truths, and when I'm through I never want to see you again as long as I live. You talk about how *I* look. *You* talk! Ha, ha, ha! When Aunt Bess hated to have you come to her flat in New York, because of how you look, when Dad pretty nearly couldn't get you the job, because of how you look—when your clothes and ties look as if they had come out of a rag bag—just look at yourself, Mr. Bossy Frost. And *you* dare talk to *me*!"

But Richard Frost did not hear the end of Natalie's tirade. For the front door had slammed behind him.



"Just look at yourself, Mr. Bossy Frost"

Cindy came down the hall, her eyes wide open. "Land sakes, chile, why you chillun talk so mean?"

"Never mind," snapped Natalie. "Supper for one, Cindy, and I hope there's lots of cake. Mr. Frost has left!" But her bad temper left her and she threw herself against the ample bosom of the kind old woman. "Oh, Cindy," she sobbed, "I hate everybody in the world but you and Daddy and Miss Lee and—"

"There, there, chile," said Cindy, comfortingly. "You doan hate nobody. You'se jes' mad at the young man. Doan cry. Tell Cindy all about it."

But there was nothing to tell that Cindy would understand, and right after supper, Natalie went to her room. Taking the shade off her student lamp she moved the light before the mirror on her dressing table. She studied her reflection long and carefully. She did not spare herself. She noted that her complexion, once so clear and fresh, was pasty, that her hair was lifeless and disheveled, and worst of all, that her body was crooked. "He's right," she admitted, "All but the fat—well, and he's a little bit right about that, too," she admitted reluctantly. "He took a mean way to tell me and I'll never forgive him as long as I live, but he's right. Okay, Natalie Harding," she said to her reflection in the glass, "it's up to you. Maybe it's too late to do anything about getting your body straight, but you can do something about the rest of yourself."

Next day she bought several women's magazines as well as a periodical devoted to physical improvement. She studied all the advertisements and read, carefully, every beauty hint. It happened that one magazine had an article on dieting to lose weight, giving menus, meal by meal, for two weeks. It was headed "HOW FILM STARS KEEP OFF POUNDAGE." Natalie sniffed. "If they can do it, I can," she vowed.

Lucinda listened in horror as her young mistress outlined the meals for the next few days.

"But, chile," she protested, "what you-all goin' to eat?"

"What I told you, Cindy. Now don't argue with me."

"I never heard tell of no citrus fruits. What are they?"

"Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clemens," quoted Natalie, gaily. "And grapefruit, especially grapefruit. Come on, it will do you good too, and believe, me Lucinda Marianna Meeker, if you ever so much as show me a piece of chocolate cake again, you and I will go out of business!"

Lucinda shook her head in dismay. But Natalie was adamant. Oh, it wasn't easy! She often longed to give it all up and go back to her lazy, heedless ways, but she had only to recall any one of Richard Frost's remarks to regain her determination. Some-

times the fragrant smell of Cindy's waffles made her mouth water, but she valiantly sucked a lemon, and felt very noble!

Dieting was only a small part of her scheme. She answered practically every advertisement for beauty helps that the magazines published, and a stream of samples came through the mail. Each night she tried one or two creams or lotions. It was a remarkable thing that her skin survived such treatment, but it did. For along with the manufactured aids to beauty, she included the best aid of all—faithful, regular exercise.

Each morning and night as faithfully as little Marujita, Natalie went through the exercises that Uncle Bill had given her. At first she was so stiff and sore that it was agony to move, but she kept it up. As she grew more limber she repeated the exercises each afternoon when she returned from school, and she added one of her own. A long hall stretched midway through the Harding house, at one end of which was a large mirror. Fifty times a day she walked a crack down the centre of the hall, one foot behind the other, Indian fashion, her head up. And she gradually improved in posture.

On the street, however, especially in the vicinity of the school building, she limped as of old. She was not going to let her enemies see a change and comment upon it! Even Teddy was not told the secret.

Although she still studied hard, she devoted more and more time outside school hours, to her exercises. She was far from satisfied with the progress she was making. Why, her posture was awful! Would she ever be erect again? No matter how diligently she followed the advice in the Health Magazine, she could not see that it helped her much. Was there someone who might give her a little advice? If only Miss Lee's patient in Albany would get well, so that Natalie could see Miss Lee. Somehow this was not the sort of thing one could put in a letter.

Uncle Bill's exercises took so long to show results. Was there no speedier means? Then she remembered how Louisa May Alcott's Jill had helped her back grow straight after her accident, by lying on a board. She would utilize all those hours at night when she was asleep teaching her back to be straight!

At first she tried the ironing board, but that was too short, so she hired a carpenter to cut off the top of an old kitchen table. That was just right.

Every night thereafter, poor Lucinda, shaking her head and protesting to no avail, strapped the girl's arms and ankles to the board. "Anything as uncomfortable as this must be good for me," Natalie said. But in spite of the discomfort, it did not produce the desired result.

The high school authorities had excused Natalie from gymnasium exercises since her accident, and

Miss Verdrey, the teacher of gymnastics for girls, had had very little contact with Natalie. She knew the girl's story, however, from her old friend, Leonora Hart. So she was surprised and delighted when Natalie telephoned her one evening and asked if she might come to see her to talk over some business.

Natalie told Miss Verdrey the problems that were perplexing her and the remedies she had been trying, and the teacher had the good sense to show neither horror nor amusement at the girl's drastic measures.

"I'll help you all I can, Natalie," she said kindly, "but first I think you should see your doctor to be sure that such strenuous exercises won't hurt you."

"Oh, no," Natalie cried. "I don't want to do that. Nobody needs a doctor just to take exercises. See here," she showed Miss Verdrey some of the health culture magazines she had been trying to follow. "I can't seem to get the hang of the stuff it tells you to do in these books. I thought maybe I could get you to help me after school. I'm earning a little money now. Would you let me pay you for your time?"

"Come and see me tomorrow night," Miss Verdrey suggested, "and I'll have a plan of exercises worked out to give you. But there isn't to be any money, silly girl. I'll be glad to help for the fun of it."

After Natalie had left, Miss Verdrey rang up Dr. Burgess to whom she told the story, but she asked

the kind old doctor to be discreet. "I don't want Natalie to think I have broken her confidence," Miss Verdrey explained, "but of course I would not dare prescribe exercises for her until you have examined her and given your consent."

So, as far as Natalie knew, it was just by chance that Dr. Burgess happened to pass by her house next day as she was coming in from school. He asked if he might come in and warm his hands at her fire.

When Cindy saw who the caller was, she brought in a tray with tea and scones, and the doctor and Natalie enjoyed a little visit together. As they talked of casual things, he was secretly studying the girl.

"Have another scone, Doctor," said Natalie. "They are all for you. I don't eat them myself. Too fattening."

Now Dr. Burgess had not ministered to people old and young for forty years without learning a good deal about the human heart, even when it beat in a sixteen-year old breast. And soon Natalie, to her own surprise, found herself telling the good doctor of her worry about her physical condition.

"Don't say anything to my father or to anyone, Dr. Burgess," she said. "I don't want them to worry about me, but I'd like to have you look me over and see if I am getting along all right. I am trying to take exercises to get myself in fit shape again, if I can—if there isn't anything wrong with me, I mean."

“Very good, my dear,” the Doctor answered. “There’s no time like the present. Let’s have a look at you now.”

Lucinda, bringing in a fresh pot of tea, heard these words with joy. Back in her kitchen, seated in her copious arm chair, she rocked back and forth, her face beaming.

“Oh, thank de Lawd,” she said, softly. “Thank de good Lawd God!”





Chapter XI

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

“Good luck come one by one, but trouble come in bunches,” Lucinda was fond of saying. But perhaps the good fairy who watched over Natalie Harding had decided to change Natalie’s luck and let it be both plentiful and good.

One morning the postman arrived with a letter that made the world sing for Natalie, for it bore an Albany postmark and it read, “My nice old lady who has been ill for so long has recovered and does not

need me any more. As I am very tired after this long and trying case, I think I will go home for a good long rest with my family in Panama. But I cannot bear to go so far away without seeing you first. Have you room in your Tourist Home for a steady customer, steady for a week or two, I mean? Miss Lee."

"Now how did she know about my Tourist Home?" asked Natalie, after hastening to reply that there was a heart always full of room for Miss Lee at Harding Hall. Natalie had forgotten that Miss Verdrey and Miss Lee were friends. And she did not know that ever since her first visit to Miss Verdrey's home, Miss Lee had been receiving frequent reports about her.

Natalie was sitting in the kitchen with Cindy, making plans for Miss Lee's visit and studying the calendar. "Oh, Cindy," she cried, "that six weeks' trip of Daddy's will be over just about the time Miss Lee plans to get here. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the three of us could be back in Harding Hall together again with you to take care of us?"

"What you goin' to do about the towerists, Miss Natalie," asked Cindy, "when your pappy comes home?"

"Oh, I'm going to take a chance on Daddy's not minding, Cindy. I think maybe he suspects that something is going on anyway. His last letter said

that judging by the size of the grocery bills you and I must be living on air."

"You tell your pappy it ain't air, but it might as well be!" Natalie's diet was still a sore point with Lucinda. "Grapefruit! Land sakes, chile, I should think you would be ashamed to look one of them things in the face!"

"Cheer up, old dear, you can bake cakes and pie and beaten biscuits to your heart's content, when Daddy comes home!" Oh, those were wonderful words: "When Daddy comes home!" She said them over and over to herself, for they had a beautiful sound.

Miss Lee timed her arrival in Buffalo during school hours, for she wanted to have a talk with Dr. Burgess before she saw Natalie. She learned many things, some of which would have greatly surprised Natalie—of the X-ray picture he had taken, with a full account of the girl's condition which he had sent to Dr. Rodgers after the accidental tea party; and that the exercises, which Miss Verdrey had given her, had all been prescribed by Uncle Bill.

"When Dr. Rodgers and I learned from the X-ray I sent him that there was nothing the matter with the bones, we worked out a good system of exercises which I passed on to Miss Verdrey who, by the way, made Natalie throw away the board on which she had been sleeping every night. The child has been

suffering not from lameness, but from worry and loneliness. She has pulled herself together and is coming along splendidly. I am proud of her." The old doctor blew his nose violently, and Miss Lee openly wiped her eyes.

"I can't think what her father means by leaving her alone so much. It isn't like him to be so neglectful," the old doctor went on.

"He does not realize Natalie's condition, I am sure," answered Miss Lee, hotly. She could not bear to have anyone criticize Donald Harding. "No doubt Natalie has made him believe everything is all right."

"Where are his eyes, then?" the doctor snorted.

"In the Far West where he is trying desperately hard to put a new business on its feet, to make a living for Natalie. You know as well as I do that if Donald Harding had not been away, Natalie would never have got herself into such a state!" Miss Lee spoke with more vehemence than she knew.

"Oh-ho!" said Dr. Burgess to himself, "so that's the way the wind lies, is it? And a fine thing it would be too, for if ever a child needed a home and a family, it is my little Natalie."

"Well," he said aloud, "I mean to have a straight talk with the gentleman when he returns. Of course I know he has been worried about business affairs, so I won't be too hard on him. I hope for Natalie's sake as well as his own that his business is improving,

for Rodgers and I both want to prescribe a complete change of scene for the child. That's what she needs."

Miss Lee was watching from the library window of Harding Hall and saw Natalie coming home from school. She tapped on the pane, and Natalie's heart skipped a beat when she saw who was there. With a cry of joy she ran into the house, and soon they were in each other's arms, laughing and crying, while the beaming Lucinda looked on.

Before she slept that night, Natalie had confided most of the story to her beloved friend. She told of the Autumn Ball and the talk she had overheard among the boys, and of the long, lonely days with Daddy away so much. And then of her fear that, in spite of the exercises, she might never be really like other girls again. But of that "plain, unvarnished truth" from the lips of Richard Frost, she said nothing.

"You and I with the best intentions in the world have been neglecting this girl, Donald Harding," wrote Miss Lee to Natalie's father, late that night, after Natalie had gone to sleep. "Oh, I know we have both been busy, but haven't we taken a little too much for granted? I am going to tell you the story of Natalie's winter as she told it to me, for I want you to be in possession of the facts before you see her. And then we must take Dr. Burgess' advice and give her a complete change of scene. She

needs companionship with young people who don't know her story, who do not look upon her as a cripple, as the youngsters here in Buffalo do. That will build up her confidence in herself as nothing else can. She has done so much for herself, now let's help her a little. My family will welcome her in Panama—let me take her there with me for my vacation. If we travel tourist class the trip will cost you little more than you would have to spend maintaining this establishment for that length of time."

Then followed the story as Miss Lee had heard it from Natalie's lips. Miss Lee did not spare herself, nor for that matter, did she spare the Rodgers, nor Donald Harding himself!

Forty-eight hours after he read Miss Lee's letter, Natalie's father was speeding home to Buffalo. When he saw the sign, "Tourists Accommodated" which decorated his ancestral home, his eyes filled with tears. "The poor, game little idiot!" he said softly.

"Rat-a-tat-tat!" His familiar knock sounded on the door. Natalie, with Miss Lee and Cindy, only a step or two behind her, rushed to the door. And soon Daddy's arms were around her and Daddy's voice was saying huskily their old greeting, "Hi, Nats, how's things?"

It was a happy homecoming. "Just like old times," said Natalie, as Cindy, her face one enormous grin, summoned them to dinner.

"Better than old times," answered Donald Harding, as he seated himself before a platter heaped with Cindy's justly famous fried chicken and spoon bread. "Frankly, I always did prefer eating in a proper dining room to a bedroom, or even a sleeping porch. This is the first respectable meal the three of us have ever shared together."

Two days after he arrived, Donald Harding removed the sign from the door.

"No, my dear," he said firmly, when Natalie begged that she and Cindy be allowed to continue their business, "Miss Lee and I have other plans for you which we will discuss tonight after dinner. Meanwhile, look at this."

It was Saturday night. Daddy held out the *Buffalo Daily News* open at the page on which the weekly Minnie cartoon was always printed. "Here's our old friend Minnie in a new role," said Daddy. "She is running a Tourist Home. Now I wonder where our young Mr. Frost could have got that idea?" he asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Well," exclaimed Natalie, "this explains the mysterious piece of mail that I found in the mail box today. Look here," she said, holding out a sheet of paper to Miss Lee and her father.

It was a bill of the kind that can be bought at any stationery store. Under the usual heading was typed:

To Miss Natalie Harding

For one whale of a good idea \$50.00

Kindly send receipt to Richard Frost

192 Waverly Place

New York City

Rec'd Payment

And accompanying this amazing document was a money order for fifty dollars!

"I've never been so rich in my life," said Natalie. "I don't think I ought to take it, though."

"If you have started him on a new series for Minnie it is worth it to him, dear," her father answered. "I'd take it if I were you."

"He would have his feelings badly hurt if you didn't," put in Miss Lee.

So Natalie sat down and signed her name under "Rec'd Payment." Then she added, "P.S. I think it is too much, but thank you anyway."

"Is that all you are going to say," her father asked in surprise.

"Yes," said Natalie in a very small voice. "If he had wanted to hear more about me he would have asked."

"All right, young lady, you know your own mind better than I do. You have certainly proved that," he went on with a heartfelt sigh. "What are you going to do with your riches?"

"Turn them right spang into the Harding bank account for you to use however you want to, Daddy. That's what you do with your earnings, so why shouldn't I?"

"Maybe because we can cook up a better way to spend them," her father replied. "Nats," he went on, "do you remember the council of war that I once called in New York? Well, now I want to call another one. In the two days I have been home, I have learned many things about a certain young woman whom I thought I knew. I have talked to several people who know more about what she has been up to than I do. No, my dear, don't interrupt. I have the floor.

"For instance, I have learned from the grocer the reason you and Cindy have stopped having grocery bills for me to pay. I have learned from Mr. Collins at the high school that, except for a course in Modern History, you have enough credits to graduate right now. He says that you could study that course from far away, if you happened to be far away, and take your examination by mail, and never have to set foot in Buffalo High again if you don't want to, although he hopes you will want to come back to graduate with your class in June. However, he would even mail you your diploma if you liked.

"And I've learned from Miss Verdrey and Dr. Burgess and by long distance from Bill Rodgers, that

you've got yourself in fine shape again, even if you did get off to a bad start. And from Miss Lee I've learned," he stopped and turning to Leonora Hart, he made a little bow and grinned sheepishly, "well, I've learned a lot about you and me and life and even the Constitution of the United States," he finished lamely. "In fact, my darling Nats, I've been talked to like a Dutch uncle. And the long and short of it is—well, maybe it's your turn, Miss Lee."

"Nats," said Miss Lee, smiling at them both, "if a fairy godmother came into this room and said, 'Natalie, you may have any wish you like', what would you say?"

"Hold on a minute," protested Donald Harding. "Don't give the girl an opening like that. She'll swamp us! Let's limit the fairy godmother's offer to something reasonable, as for instance, 'Where would you like to go if you could take a trip?' "

Natalie who had been wondering whether her father and Miss Lee had taken leave of their senses, began to understand.

"A trip?" she asked. Suddenly all the happy memories of the days she and Miss Lee had spent talking of the Isthmus of Panama came back to her. She remembered the long nights at the hospital when sleep would not come, and how she had comforted herself with the dream that some fine day they would go traveling together. Was this what her father meant?

She believed it was. With shining eyes she said one word—a word which for her had come to mean romance and adventure in strange, far-away places, “Panama!”

Miss Lee laughed. “Then you will be glad to see this, Nats,” she said, and handed the girl a folded cablegram. Natalie opened it and read:

DELIGHTED TO HAVE YOU COME AND BRING NATALIE
HOPE YOU WILL STAY ALL SPRING CABLE WHEN
PETE

“Oh, how wonderful,” cried Natalie. “But wait a minute. What on earth are we talking about! How can I possibly go on such an expensive trip? You know we can’t afford it, Dad.”

“Suppose you let somebody else worry about finances for a change,” her father answered. “Sometimes, in spite of what Cindy has to say to the contrary, *good* luck comes in bunches, too. Bess and I have sold this house to a syndicate which is going to put up an apartment house that will nearly cover the whole block. Fortunately they do not want to start tearing down the houses for several months, so many of the families are going to continue living here for awhile. But as far as the Hardings are concerned, our only use for Harding Hall until its demolition will be for furniture storage.”

“Have they paid for the house?” asked Natalie.

“Some of it, on account. More than enough for

me to pay for your trip, and Aunt Bess wants to use some of her money to get you some new togs to wear in the tropics. We can't think of any way that either of us would rather spend the money from the sale of Harding Hall."

"I could pay for part of the trip with this money from Dick," said Natalie.

"No, darling. You save that money to spend for something you very much want to do—something you could not possibly do if you didn't have money of your very own. Please don't deprive me of the fun of paying for your trip, my dear. I want to do something to try to make up for this terrible year you have had."

Natalie put her finger across her father's lips. "Don't say such silly things, Daddy," she said. "Most of the trouble this year has been my own fault. Please let's not worry any more. It's all over. But Daddy, how about Cindy? What will she do for a job if we sell the house and all go away?"

Her father chuckled. "Cindy is as pleased as punch. She has been longing to go back to North Carolina to see her twin grandchildren, but hasn't wanted to leave you. Aren't we a funny lot? Each of us doing things we thought the other fellow wanted, and all of us being so woefully mistaken? Well, one of these days we may ask Cindy to rejoin us in our new home which will probably be either in New York or Chi-

cago. It looks as if I'll soon be through doing leg work for the company and able to settle down and have my home and my girl again. Then we will see."

"And you are sure it's all right about school, Dad," Natalie persisted, "to leave in the middle of the year, I mean?"

"Mr. Collins went all over the situation with me," her father assured her. "Apparently you have been about wearing out the school books. He wants you to go in to see him on Monday and get your Modern History course. Then you'll be all set."

So it was decided. Natalie and Miss Lee planned to stay as short a time as possible in Buffalo, for they had many things to do in New York in the fortnight before the boat was to sail. Together they packed away Natalie's books and clothes, except a few items in her present wardrobe which she would take to Panama with her.

In the bottom of her trunk in the attic, hidden away under her trophies where she had put it that sad morning after the Autumn Ball, she came upon her blue taffeta evening gown.

"I'll just leave this behind," she said to Miss Lee. "I'll probably have no use for it."

"Indeed you will have use for it," answered Miss Lee. "There will be some lovely affairs in Panama for which this will come in handy."

"Oh, but Miss Lee," cried Natalie, the old un-

happy look coming again in her eyes, "I can't dance any more. Of course I've improved with my exercises, but I can't go to a party and dance in public!"

"Let's decide about that later, dear," Miss Lee suggested. "But take the dress along, anyway, just to play safe. And isn't it a beauty!" she exclaimed, as she shook it out. "But oh, so wrinkled! We must have Lucinda press it right away, even if we are going to pack it again."

One afternoon, a few days later Lucinda, resplendent in her going-away clothes, came into the living room to bid the family good-bye. Her broad, black face beamed under a waving white ostrich plume atop her magenta hat.

"When you-all come back from them heathen places, you just send for Cindy, Miss Natalie," she said. "I'll come back to cook for you if you be at the ends of the yearth."

"Bless your heart, Cindy," Natalie answered. "It wouldn't be home without you no matter where we lived."

"I'se glad to see you look so spry, Miss Natalie," Cindy said. "'Pears like you is some kind of tonic, Miss Lee, ma'am. 'Foh you come, this chile look all tuckered out."

"Thank you, Lucinda," Miss Lee replied kindly. "I promise to bring her back all well and rosy again."

"Good-bye, chile," Lucinda said, as the cab which

was to take her to the railway station pulled up at the door. "Doan let them alligators git you!"

Natalie laughed. "I'll be careful, Cindy dear. Good-bye."

Natalie went to the window and watched the huge woman clamber into the cab, settling herself regally on the back seat, with her multitudinous bundles spread around her. A great white handkerchief fluttered for a moment at the window and then the cab drove away.

A few hours later, Natalie and Miss Lee boarded a train for New York City. Daddy was to follow in a day or so, and they planned to have some jolly times together before they sailed. Apart from the shopping—"Think of buying summer clothes in the middle of January!" Natalie said—there was the all-important examination by Uncle Bill.

"I am sure your doctor uncle will be able to suggest other ways to take the stiffness out of your muscles besides the exercises, Nats," Miss Lee said. "Perhaps we can go back to the hospital for more bakings. We must limber you up so that you will be able to swim and golf with the energetic Hart family."

Natalie had dreaded meeting Uncle Bill, but she saw at once how foolish her attitude had been. He made a brief examination and told her that the X-ray showed that her spine had knit perfectly and that

nothing but her own laziness could prevent her from being as well and strong as before.

"We will have Miss Lee massage you to get some of the kinks out of your muscles, and I want you to go on with the exercises you learned from Miss Verdrey until I tell you to stop. While you are in New York we can work in some electric bakings at the hospital. But mostly I prescribe plenty of outdoor exercise and lots of fun.

"I am not going to read you a lecture, my dear," he went on in a more gentle tone. "It is a fine thing to be a good student and get such high marks at school. The world needs more serious students, but people should not be all student. That makes them lopsided. It is just as wrong for your health for you to spend all your time over books as it would be for your mind if you spent all your time at games. The most worth-while people in the world have learned to strike a balance, and that is what you must try to do.

"Now, my dear, there is nothing on earth the matter with you but worry. And it's up to you to forget about that. I can't think of a better way than by taking this glorious trip and interesting yourself in everything you see and in the new people whom you will meet. And just remember, Nats, that not one soul you will meet on board ship nor anyone you will see in Panama will know anything about the trouble

following your accident unless you yourself tell them about it. To them you will seem just what you are—a mighty attractive young woman. Now don't forget that."

In spite of the many things Natalie had to do during her brief visit, she made several trips to the hospital to lie under the great, health-giving lamps. The first time she went there she took Miss Lee with her to call on the Wardlets, but all the beds were filled with new little people. Not one of the Five Little Cheepers of her hospital days was there.

"All discharged, cured," said the head nurse in answer to Natalie's question. "You see, you named the Ward correctly, Natalie."

"What did you call it, Nats?" Miss Lee asked.

"Oh, didn't Natalie tell you? She named it Ward Deliverance, and right she was."

New York held one great surprise for Natalie. Shortly after his arrival, Donald Harding, unknown to Natalie, suggested that Aunt Bess invite Richard Frost to dinner. Aunt Bess obligingly agreed, although she sighed at the prospect of entertaining that sloppy young man, as she always called him, in her immaculate apartment.

"Be prepared for a shock, Sis," Donald Harding warned his sister.

At seven o'clock that night the door bell rang. "See who it is, will you please, Natalie?" Aunt Bess

asked, and Natalie went to the door. Standing there, hat in hand, was a tall, handsome and so perfectly groomed a young man that Natalie all but failed to recognize him.

For a moment the memory of their last meeting swept over them and they stood in embarrassed silence not knowing what to say. After all, when you have told a young man that you hate him and never want to see him again as long as you live, it is a bit awkward to meet him on the doorstep of your aunt's apartment and be expected to play the cordial hostess.

It was Dick who recovered first. "Say, Nats," he said with his well-remembered grin, "let's forget it, shall we?"

"Right," said Natalie, eagerly.

"Shake," said Dick and held out his hand. So Natalie ushered him into the living room where the family was assembled, chuckling to herself as she saw the look of amazement on her aunt's face as she noted Dick's changed appearance.

"Will wonders never be done ceasing," murmured Uncle Bill. Natalie hoped Dick had not heard him but, after all, one could not blame Uncle Bill for his surprise. This was indeed a transformation! Natalie's eyes wandered from the sleek, well-brushed hair, the well-tied cravat that matched the handkerchief peeping out of the pocket of the well-pressed suit, down to the shiny shoes.

Dick made the rounds, greeting each member of the family with a polite bow and handshake, "Not bumping into a thing," as Aunt Bess remarked afterwards.

Daddy was watching the reactions of the family with a twinkle in his eye. This then was the shock about which he had warned his sister, and he thoroughly enjoyed watching her.

"Good evening, Beau Brummel," he said, when Dick got around to him, and everybody laughed, Dick most of all.

As Dick took Natalie in to dinner she whispered, "You do look wonderful, Dick. You don't mind my saying so, do you?"

"Heavens no!" Dick responded. "Survey your handiwork, young woman. This vision of sartorial perfection you see before you is entirely due to you for your—er—shall we say 'kind words'? And if I may say so, Nats, you don't look so dusty yourself—not so dusty!"

"Speaking about those kind words," said Natalie, "yours to me had some effect, too, though I had much farther to go. Perhaps you may notice a difference."

"What on earth are you two kids talking about?" asked Daddy.

"A true story we once heard, Daddy," Natalie answered mysteriously.

"Yes," put in Dick. "A couple of stories. And they were 'plain and unvarnished', eh, Nats?"

As they seated themselves at the dinner table Natalie said, "It was wonderful getting all that money, Dick. And by the way, if I see anything particularly funny on the ship I'll let you know about it. Maybe we could send Minnie Mis-hap on a cruise."

"Good girl," said her father. "That sounds like a good idea to follow the Tourist Home series. Don't you think so, Dick?"

"It's another bull's eye or I'm a Chinaman!" said Dick, enthusiastically. "Here's where you earn your trip and then some, Natalie. What would I do without the two of you?" he said, smiling gratefully at the Hardings.

After a very jolly dinner, Uncle Bill said, "Look here, everybody, I think this reunion calls for a celebration. I propose a party in honor of the three creators of Minnie Mis-hap!"

"Good," said Aunt Bess. "Just give us a chance to change our clothes, and then let's go to the theatre."

Soon they were riding along the Drive in a shining car just like the people Natalie had so often watched from the window when first she came out of the hospital many months ago. She could hardly believe her senses.

Uncle Bill never did things by halves. After the play they went atop a great skyscraper to look at the

world from the observation tower. When they stepped out on the balcony the sight that met her eyes fairly took Natalie's breath away. Lights gleamed and sparkled in every direction. "I can't tell where the stars end and the electric lights begin," said Natalie, as Dick tried to point out and name one giant skyscraper after another. To the west of them was a line of lights from the Jersey coast, and to the east the patterns of the great bridges were pricked against the black sky. Far, far below, crawling along the bright streets were numberless automobiles looking from that great height like tiny black beetles studded with jewels. Away off in the harbor the Goddess of Liberty held aloft her flaming torch shining over a darkened world.

"It's one of the greatest sights in the world, I think," said Aunt Bess, speaking from the background of her European travel.

"It's fairyland!" cried Natalie.

"Twentieth Century variety," added Daddy.

"We'll go through that fairyland on foot before you take your boat, Nats," said Dick. "It won't look so glamorous near at hand and in broad daylight perhaps, but I'm willing to bet you will find it just as interesting."

That night before she slept, Natalie thought how many things had happened in the two years she had just been through and of all the new people who had



"It's fairyland!" cried Natalie

become so important to her because she and her father had had a bad accident! And she thought of the great change in Dick Frost, and of the opportunity for his development which had been the result of that accident.

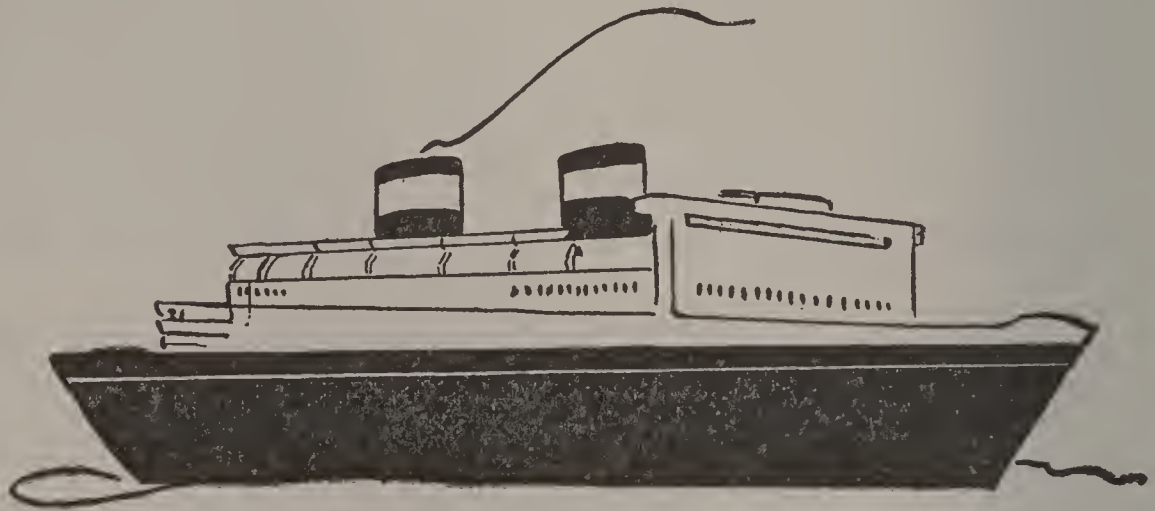
“It’s a funny world,” she thought. “Why if Daddy and I had not been nearly killed I would never have known Miss Lee, or been going to Panama, or even have met Mr. Richard Frost! Heavens, wouldn’t *that* have been awful? Yet you can’t go around the world hoping to have accidents so you won’t miss knowing someone—oh, dear!” But she was much too sleepy to worry more over that problem.

On the morning two days later, came the beginning of her great adventure. No thrill she had hitherto known could compare with that of walking up the gangplank of a great ship and knowing that she was to have six days in that strange world.

This was indeed her dream come true, for now at last she and her dear Miss Lee were to sail the ocean blue together.

The long, slender ship was gay with flags and pennants and confetti. The band struck up, *Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot*. Natalie and Miss Lee stood at the bow of the ship waving good-bye to the little group on the pier—Daddy and the Rodgers and Dick, who had come to see them off. Soon the ship sailed out into the harbor, escorted by the busy, fussy little

tugs; past the Statue of Liberty which Natalie had seen from afar the night of the party, past other ships going and coming from all parts of the world. The great towers of Manhattan grew smaller and smaller, and at last disappeared altogether.





Chapter XII

FOR TO ADMIRE AND FOR TO SEE

S.S. Virginia

Somewhere in the Caribbean

March Fifth

My very dearest Daddy:

Here I am basking in the warm sunshine, when you, poor darling, are probably freezing. I am the very happiest girl in the world. I told Miss Lee that I couldn't stand it another minute until I had written to you. Of course I can't mail the letter for a

day or so. Perhaps I could persuade a seagull to put it in his beak and carry it to you. Do you suppose I could?

There is so much to tell. Where shall I begin? Shall I start with telling you all about the wonderful things Miss Lee and I found in our stateroom? Yes, that's a good place. Your package puzzled me with the note, "For to admire and for to see, for to behold this world so wide." And then I opened it and there was my darling little candid camera! It will help me remember forever what I admire and see on this wonderful trip. But oh, Daddy, do you think you should have spent all that money?

I asked Miss Lee if she knew where those lines came from, and she said she did. She's a great one for poetry, that lady. Then she recited the rest of the poem and told me it was one of her favorites of all Kipling.

But to go on with our presents. Aunt Bess sent me a lovely traveling case all fitted up with toilet articles, just like one I had wanted in the shop window. Teddy Davis and his mother sent a basket of fruit. And there were even steamer letters from Ruth and Dorothy! Can you imagine that? I thought they had forgotten I existed!

The funniest present of all came from Dick. How he ever persuaded the purser to let him put that huge thing in the cabin, I don't know. It is an enormous,

larger-than-life statue of Minnie Mis-hap, made of cardboard with arms of strands of wire so they can hold things. And it was hung all over with gifts like a Christmas tree. Some nice and some silly. Candy and nuts, a novel for Miss Lee, and sketching pads and crayons for me. Then a doll's life preserver marked "Hope this won't be needed", a tiny hatchet labelled "For hacking your way through the Jungle", a box of crackers marked "Hard tack in case of shipwreck"; and a corsage for each of us, made of a leek, a bunch of carrots and a bunch of spring onions, all done up in cellophane. Thank goodness, for they didn't smell. Isn't he a nut? I certainly can't get over the way that boy has improved in appearance. He is kind of nice, don't you think so?

Miss Lee was awfully pleased with the copy of Masfield's poems which you sent her. When I was first hurt and she came to be my nurse, she recited one of those poems to me—the one called *Cargoes*. Why, come to think of it, it was that very poem that made me want to come to Panama! And I'm almost there now. Dreams just *do* come true, I don't care what people say. When Miss Lee unwrapped your present she said, "Do you know, Natalie, I think your Dad is one of the nicest people in the world." She isn't the only one!

But I must tell you more about the trip. This is just about the first time I have sat down on my deck

chair since we came on board ship. I had no idea there were so many interesting things to do on a ship, especially one that sails through southern waters where it is warm enough to swim in the pool on deck. We have a dip every morning before breakfast and I usually go in again after lunch. The pool is too small to take more than a few strokes, so I don't know yet whether I can really swim or not. I just paddle around, but that is something. And speaking of lunch, the food is so good that we are afraid we are gaining weight. Wouldn't that be terrible? I can't boss the steward around about not tempting me with good food the way I could poor old Cindy!

And—knock on wood—I haven't been seasick yet really, although I had a close call when it got choppy the first night out.

Later—

I stopped writing for awhile because somebody called out that there was a school of porpoises playing on our starboard side and we all rushed to the rail to see them. Aren't they crazy creatures, but what perfect cartwheels they can turn!

Isn't it funny how quickly one makes friends on board ship and talks to everybody? I suppose it is because we are all thrown together for such a short space of time. We are so far away from the world, and nobody has to work and heaven knows we can't

go anywhere! There are a lot of nice people on board and everyone looks especially nice now that they have put on their summer clothes. As soon as we got into the Gulf Stream the girls put on beach pajamas or shorts and the men white flannels. I was glad I had some new things to wear. And you ought to see the officers and stewards in their white ducks!

People play a lot of shuffleboard on deck and deck tennis too. I guess I can't manage the tennis yet awhile, but I got up early one morning because I wanted to try some shuffleboard before anyone was around to watch me. All of a sudden I was conscious that someone was watching me. It was the boy who sits at our table, whose name is Ernest Chase. He and his father are going to California where Ernest is going to work on his uncle's ranch. Mr. Chase told Miss Lee that Ernest had been very sick and the doctors had advised an outdoor life. Mr. Chase is very nice and talkative at the table, but Ernest never has a word to say. He looks pale and thin and his father watches him with a kind, crinkly look in his eyes—just like another father I know.

Well, Ernest and I were all alone on deck and we got to talking and he told me a lot about himself and what it was like to be banished, as he called it, from everything you care about just because you are sick. And what do you think he said to me? "Of course that is something you will never know about—a

husky looking girl like you!" Imagine *me* not knowing what it is like to be sick!

So you see, Daddy, they didn't know about it. Maybe it doesn't show after all. Somebody once said to me that nobody would know I was sick if I didn't act sick. I was awfully mad at that person but I guess he was right. I asked Miss Lee why she hadn't told the Chases about it and she said she guessed she had forgotten about it herself.

Did you know we were going to stop at Havana? I don't know how I happened not to know about it. It was a very pleasant surprise. And Daddy, what a treat! We were there seven hours. It was simply beautiful. We were awakened early in the morning by the gong that calls us to our meals. Miss Lee and I looked out of the porthole and saw a long line of twinkling lights shining like diamonds against the dark sea, for of course the sun wasn't up yet and the moon was fading. We hustled up and got dressed and went out on deck and just as the sun rose the boat slid into the harbor, past Morro Castle and the Cabana fortress. It looked lovely. Morro Castle is really beautiful and it looks as if it has been standing there since the beginning of time. Miss Lee said it was built to protect the Spanish settlement from the raids of Sir Francis Drake. I knew Drake was an explorer but I had no idea he was a buccaneer as well. What a lot of history I am going to learn down

here! You know, Daddy, if I weren't so sure that I want to be an artist I'd like to major in history.

We waited and waited for the Cuban official to let us disembark. Oh, I was impatient! With so many things to see and only seven hours in Havana, I couldn't bear to waste any time waiting for an old customs officer!

When we finally did get off we hired a big car—you should have heard the drivers calling us in the funniest pidgin English—with Mr. Chase and his son. Two sweet, fluttery old ladies who sit at our table also went with us, and we all divvied up on the expense. Miss Lee was so anxious to have me see the beautiful cathedral in the Plaza de Armas. She told me that Columbus was buried there before his coffin was taken to Santo Domingo. I was never in such an ancient building before. It made me want to be very quiet. Do you understand what I mean? I can't describe it very well, but it was a sort of awesome feeling. It made me realize that the world had been going on a long, long time before ever I was born, and that it would go on a long time after—well, that sounds gloomy as I write it. But it doesn't feel gloomy inside.

We went through the quaintest little winding streets to get to the Cathedral, with beautiful old houses of soft colored stone and lots of flowers blooming on the wrought-iron balconies. Dark-skinned

women and children stared at us, and sometimes they called a greeting to us in Spanish. Of course we answered, though we had to speak in English.

Then we drove all around. It was such a bright blue and gold day. Of course we did a little shopping. No one could help it. There were beautiful laces and shawls and perfumes but we bought only a few little knickknacks.

Mr. Chase suggested that we have lunch at one of the sidewalk cafes. And we tried all sorts of strange and delicious foods. We all ended up with lovely ice-cold pineapple which they call *piña fria*. Miss Lee says the reason that it tastes so good is that it is ripened in the sun.

While we were sitting at the table the funniest little home-made orchestra came and played for us. They were just little Cuban boys, five of them, playing on the queerest-looking instruments; it sounded lovely though a little strange. I made a sketch of them which I will send you. They wore white sailor suits. One boy shook two big gourds which Miss Lee says they call rumbas, and another beat time by hitting two mahogany sticks together. One boy sat on something that looked like an empty crate such as we see at grocery stores. It had a couple of strings stretched across it and he twanged them. The only real tune came from a guitar that another of them played. And of course they all sang. Each song

seemed to have about a hundred verses and they sang every one of them clear through.

As we sat there a big colored woman with a tray of pineapples on her head passed by calling her wares, in a voice that made me homesick for Cindy. And people passed between the tables with baskets of flowers for sale. Oh, what flowers we saw! Millions of them at every street corner.

I hated to leave Havana. It is so beautiful and it seems so gay. But of course I'm crazy to go on to Panama.

I must tell you about the trip we had through the ship. The Captain, who is a friend of Miss Lee's brother, took us through, himself, after he learned from a radiogram that Pilot Peter Hart's sister and a friend were on board. I didn't have any idea how interesting it would be. Don't you think that people take a lot of things for granted in this world which really would make the world more interesting if people would only trouble to think about them?

First they showed us the Victualling Department. I didn't know that outside of fairy tales the word victuals was ever used for food. Goodness, how clean and orderly everything is! And I just couldn't believe how much food it was necessary to have to feed a shipload of people. Of course this trip, for the boat I mean, will last sixteen days, going all the way to San Francisco. A lot of people will get off when we

do at Balboa, but more will get on there, so it will about balance. But anyway it seems like a lot to me.

When I remember the size of the grocery orders that Cindy and I had, it just doesn't seem possible that anyone could have a grocery list as long as this one. Daddy, just try to think of fifty thousand eggs! Why I didn't know there were that many hens in the world. And ten thousand oysters! Miss Lee said that even the Walrus and the Carpenter couldn't eat that many! The chief cook showed us how the food is cooked on great electric ranges and said it was much easier to work nowadays when kitchens can be kept cool. He said it used to be that if you opened the window to get a breath of air the passengers would find cinders in their food.

After we had seen how they cook and store the victuals, we went deep down into the depths of the ship to the engine room. My, what great smooth monsters those engines are! Yet the Captain can manage them all from the bridge of the ship. He and Miss Lee got to talking about how different traveling on the sea has become from the olden days so full of hardships and danger. He said it wasn't only easier for the sailors but much more comfortable for the passengers. "It is just like being in a big hotel on firm land," the Captain said. Of course I didn't like to contradict him, but I wanted to say that nobody ever got seasick on firm land!

Tonight there is going to be a Masquerade Dance. At first, when I heard about it, I thought I wouldn't go or that I would only sit and watch. But after what Ernest said to me I have decided to take a chance. So Miss Lee and I have fixed up a couple of Harlequin costumes. They will cover us up so well that I am sure that no one will recognize me, and if I do have bad luck dancing I can go to our stateroom before they all unmask. I told Miss Lee my plan and she seemed to think it a fine idea.

Anyhow dancing can't be as uncomfortable as sleeping on a board. I can't see now how I ever did sleep on that board, Daddy. But more about tonight's party.

The deck steward is hanging up Chinese lanterns, and of course it will all look very gay and pretty and I am sure it will be lots of fun. But nothing he can do to the ship will ever look as beautiful to me as the tropical night. The stars are so big and bright and the moon so gorgeous. And did you know that the sea is phosphorescent? Each little wave has a rim of gold. And low in the horizon hangs the Southern Cross. Miss Lee says that someone has written of the Southern Cross as a "kite of golden worlds." At first I didn't understand exactly what that meant, but after awhile I saw it. Miss Lee said that when she was a child, every time she saw the Southern Cross in the sky she thought it must be

the diadem that the church hymn sings about. You know, the words "Bring forth the royal diadem." But now she thinks of it as a group of worlds, golden worlds, somewhere in the great universe outside our knowledge.

Every time Miss Lee sees beautiful things, she wants to tell about it in words just as I do in pictures. But I don't believe the artist ever lived, whether he used words or pictures, who could get all this beauty down on paper.

Now I must stop. Tomorrow we go through the Big Ditch. To think that I am to see the Panama Canal! Pilot Peter Hart is to take our boat through the locks, and we are to watch the whole thing from the bridge of the ship. Isn't that wonderful luck? And at the end of the trip we will all get off together at Balboa and I will begin my visit with the Hart family. I hope they will like me. Anyhow I will write you all about them.

Well, this is the longest letter I ever wrote in my life, but I never had so many wonderful things to tell before. Good-bye for now, Daddy, and thanks a million for this marvelous trip. Miss Lee and I send oodles of love.

Your own

Nats

P.S. Give my best love to Aunt Bess and Uncle

Bill and remember me to Mr. Richard Beau Brummel Frost. Ha, ha!

Double P.S. The Dance is over and it wasn't very awful. Maybe I'm going to be all right, Daddy, after all. I stayed for the unmasking, anyway. N.





Chapter XIII

THROUGH THE BIG DITCH

In spite of the masquerade party the night before, Natalie and Miss Lee were up bright and early next morning, for that was the day they were to go through the Big Ditch, as the workers at the Panama Canal called it. For Natalie the trip through the Canal was to be the climax of her exciting journey, but for Miss Lee it was a reunion with her elder brother of whom she was very fond.

The moment Natalie saw Pilot Peter Hart she

knew she would like him. He had Miss Lee's clear blue-gray eyes, her friendly, straightforward manner. He shook hands briskly with Natalie, saying, "I'm glad we are to have a visit from you, Miss Natalie," and he kissed his sister affectionately. Then, having obtained the Captain's permission, he invited them to the bridge of the ship to watch the passage through the famous Canal.

Natalie had expected a great deal, but she was quite unprepared for the spectacle which lay before her. As they steamed slowly out of the harbor of Cristobal toward the opening of the Canal, she looked down on the dense, green jungle. Birds of every color in the rainbow flew in and out of the foliage. Occasionally she heard, above the throbbing of the engines, the chattering of monkeys or the shrill screech of a macaw.

"Away over there is Porto Bello," said Miss Lee, pointing along the mountainous coast. "That's where Columbus landed on his fourth trip. Do you realize that he was looking for this very passage that we are to make today?"

"Yes," said Natalie. "And Porto Bello is the place where the stately Spanish galleons of our poem sailed from, isn't it?"

Soon the wild, tangled jungle gave way to grassy hills where trim white buildings appeared under neat

red roofs. And there, straight ahead of them, rose the great concrete locks of the Canal.

"Do we really climb up there?" asked Natalie.

Peter Hart laughed. "Yes, indeed! Just watch us. These are the Gatun Locks, and they are really three huge steps which we have to hurdle in order to get into Gatun Lake. The Lake is eighty-five feet higher than the Atlantic Ocean, you see."

Natalie watched breathlessly. She saw great steel cables fastened from the boat to funny squat little electric engines.

"All I do is steer," Pilot Peter said. "Those little fellows do the work. They are called mules because they are such good beasts of burden, I suppose. You see, they pull the ships through the locks. The engines are shut off, didn't you notice?"

So engrossed had Natalie been in the operating of the locks that she had not been aware that the throbbing of the engines had ceased.

"Every precaution is taken for safety," explained Pilot Peter. "Do you see that great chain yonder? That is to hold back the ship in case of accident. Now look back and you will see that we are secure in this one lock." So they were. Natalie watched the huge steel jaws close behind the ship.

"Now watch the wall of the lock," suggested Miss Lee. Natalie did so, and she saw, from the changing position of the ship in relation to the wall, that the

ship was slowly rising. Water was pouring into the chamber from the open valves, swirling and boiling around the keel and carrying the ship upward as easily as if it were a rubber ball bouncing on the waves.

Now the busy little mules were below the level of the boat instead of above it. Then the gates swung open, the guard chain dropped out of sight, and the little mules crawled forward while the ship slipped into the second chamber.

Twice this process was repeated, then the last gates were opened, the ship's whistle blew a deep blast, the cables were hauled in from the mules, the engines began to throb and the great ship sailed out into Gatun Lake.

Natalie was quivering with excitement. "What a wonderful, wonderful place this is!" she cried.

"Right you are!" said Peter Hart. "You would think I'd be used to it by now, but it always seems like a miracle to me, just as the guide books call it. And it was Yankee engineers who did the trick, remember, when other nations failed."

"And Yankee doctors," said Miss Lee. "Don't forget that, Peter."

Peter Hart laughed. "Same old Lee," he said, "Never forgets the doctors. But she is right, Miss Natalie. Jungle fever was killing off the white men who worked here until they found what was eating them. More truth than poetry in that, eh Lee? It

was the mosquito, you see, that was carrying the germ of yellow fever, and, until they got rid of *him*, they couldn't get the job done. Now there is no more healthful place on the globe than the Canal Zone. You'll see that I'm right."

Now they were steaming across a huge lake which Pilot Peter told her, with apologies for talking like a booster, was the largest artificial lake in the world.

"This is Gatun Lake," he explained, "made by damming up the Chagres River and drowning a whole forest. Look over there in the distance and you will see the tree trunks of that dead forest still standing."

The great naked trunks of the trees, some blackened, some bleached white, many of strange, fantastic shapes, looked to Natalie like something in a nightmare.

"It sounds silly, Miss Lee," whispered Natalie, "but I feel as if I were swimming under water with my eyes open."

The ship steered through tiny floating islands covered with dense masses of vegetation. Sometimes the warm breeze blew whiffs of fragrance up to them.

"What smells so delicious?" Natalie asked.

"On these islands there are lots of beautiful flowers growing. You can't make them out very well with the naked eye. Here, take my binoculars and see what you can see."

“Orchids!” exclaimed Natalie, “by the millions!”

“Yes,” laughed Miss Lee. “Orchids are as common here as dandelions up north.”

“And when I think what they cost in New York florist shops I’ve seen,” said Natalie. “Well!”

“We will bring you close enough really to see these islands one of these days, Natalie,” Peter Hart promised. “Then you will have some eye openers. We will hire a *cayuca* which is a kind of a dugout the natives make, and paddle all through this water forest.”

Natalie thought that would be very wonderful, although she was seeing a great deal of beauty with the aid of Peter Hart’s powerful glasses. Birds of every description flew in and out of the tangled green foliage. Herons stalked stiffly about the islands, look as if they were walking on stilts. Cormorants roosted high on the dead trees. The flashing wings of kingfishers, and finches and parakeets, made brilliant streaks of color as they darted about.

Natalie was amused by the battalions of pelicans flying in perfect formation like convoys of army planes.

“Did the planes learn that trick from the pelicans or the pelicans from the planes?” she asked, but before anyone could answer, she shouted, “Oh, look! Look at that alligator. I’ll have to write Cindy that I actually saw one!” Sure enough, there on one of

the floating logs, sunning himself luxuriously, was a great scaly alligator.

As the ship steamed along, Natalie occasionally caught sight of the railway running close beside this part of the Canal.

"Of course my brother Peter won't admit it, Natalie," said Miss Lee. "But the Panama Railroad is another feat of engineering that deserves to rank close beside the Canal. What frightful hardships were endured to put that job through! This beautiful jungle that appeals to your artistic eyes, is a hard, cruel place when you are trying to hack your way through it."

"Now who is talking like a guide book?" chided Peter.

"I was thinking of something even farther back," Natalie said. "So maybe I am talking like a history book. I was wondering whether this route we are taking was the one the gold seekers took long ago, before the Americans did the trick as you said?"

"Some of it is," answered Peter. "This very lake, part of which was once the bed of the Chagres River, was used first by the Spaniards and then by the buccaneers. Even our own gold seekers, the fellows that joined the gold rush to California in '49, went part of the way in canoes along this very trail. We have it easy now compared to those days.

"By the way," he went on in a lighter tone, "as

we pass the town of Gamboa where the Chagres River runs inland, watch for a surprise. Look sharp through those glasses, Natalie, and see if you can spy a strange-looking boat there in the inlet. It's Young Peter come to greet you. He's been working on the hyacinth patrol, and he said if possible, he would maneuver the boat down in time to watch us pass."

"The hyacinth patrol?" repeated Natalie. "What on earth is that?"

"It's part of the lake patrol," explained Pilot Hart. "Their job is to get rid of the water hyacinths, one of the worst pests we have to encounter. They fairly choke the rivers and make navigation almost impossible."

"Why, I know water hyacinths," said Natalie. "They are pretty purple flowers and they smell so sweet. We have often bought them at home."

"Well," answered Peter Hart, "don't tell that to Young Peter. He belongs to one of the large crews whose job it is to exterminate them."

"Doesn't he go to school?" asked Natalie.

"He has finished high school and is trying to earn enough money to go to the States to college. He just has to go up north, that boy. He takes after his Aunt Lee in that respect," he finished, smiling at his sister.

"Won't he be free to play with Natalie and me?"

asked Miss Lee. "I have been hoping we would have him for our guide."

"Yes, his shift will be over the end of this week and then he will stay at home for awhile," answered Peter.

"Look!" said Natalie who was making the most of the binoculars. "It looks as if someone was going crazy in that funny-looking houseboat down there."

"That's he," said Peter Hart, proudly. "That's Young Pete."

With the aid of the glasses Natalie got a very good look at the young man. He was standing on the top of a queer-looking barge which closely resembled a houseboat in shape and size. Young Peter was tall and slender and he looked very nice, Natalie decided, something like an older, taller Teddy Davis. He wore shorts and a sleeveless shirt and his face and arms were burned brown under his thatch of blond hair. Natalie, who was feeling the burning tropical wind through her thin sleeves, wondered how he stood the wind and sun. Apparently he was wigwagging them a greeting. They all waved to Pete, whose exhibition of wigwagging doubled in fervor when he saw them.

"What do they do with the water hyacinths, Mr. Hart?" asked Natalie who was thinking to herself that it would be fun knowing Young Pete.

"Rake them all together and spray them with chemicals to destroy them," answered Peter Hart.

"But look here, Natalie, why don't you call me something less formal? I notice you call my sister Miss Lee. As a starter how about calling me Mr. Pete so as to distinguish me from Young Pete, you know?"

"Okay, Mr. Pete," answered Natalie gaily.

"Now we are coming to the Galliard Cut," explained Mr. Peter as the waterway grew narrower. The ship was moving very slowly. On either side of them the banks rose higher and higher.

"This used to be a mountain," said Peter Hart, as casually as if he were commenting on the state of the weather. "But we cut it down to let the ships go through. Here we are passing through the Continental Divide, the great backbone of the continent of North America."

"Just think of the imagination and daring it took to cut through that, Nats," exclaimed Miss Lee. "It all looks so much better now, Peter. You know when I went up north, years ago, there were great scars on the sides of the mountains showing where they had been cut by the steam shovels. But now the scars are all healed."

"I think it's a wonderful place," cried Natalie.

"Like it?" asked Peter Hart.

"I love it," said Natalie. "And it is such a strange mixture. The Canal is so neat and spick-and-span and the Jungle is so beautiful and wild."

"We will show you some real jungle before we let

you go north again," he promised. "In fact, this very trip across the Isthmus you can make several ways. It's worth while seeing it from the railway. No doubt you will do that one day, and I'm sure Young Peter will want to take you both in the *Fallen Arch*."

"The what?" asked Miss Lee and Natalie in one breath.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. Young Pete has an automobile of as many breeds as a mongrel pup, which he has named the *Fallen Arch*. And, if I may say so, it is a very accurate name. It looks like all get out, but the boy surely covers a lot of territory in it."

"Now then," said Mr. Peter, after a long while, "here we are at the Pedro Miguel Locks. This time we will be lowered instead of lifted into the Miraflores Lake. When we reach the Miraflores Locks we will be lowered two steps more, and from there you will see the Pacific Ocean, the same one that Balboa saw under slightly different circumstances."

Natalie watched the maneuvering of the boat through these locks with as keen an interest as before.

"Here we are," said Pilot Hart at last, "and there is the Pacific!" Stretching ahead of them, bright blue under the tropical sky, gleamed the great ocean.

"No wonder Balboa prayed when he first saw it!" exclaimed Natalie.

"Safe home," said Peter Hart as he nosed the ship

into the harbor. "The Land divided, the World united. You've crossed a continent, young lady. What do you think of that?"

"Already?" asked Natalie in surprise. "Oh, it was wonderful! I want to do it all over again!"

"See," said Miss Lee, "there's the city of Balboa in the distance where our family lives."

Natalie looked across the harbor to the Ancon Hill beneath which the city of Balboa lay, looking very gay in the sunlight, with gleaming red roofs and white houses. This then was to be her home for the next two months. She felt as if all sorts of wonderful things were in store for her.

"My, how shiny it looks!" she exclaimed.

"They call it Spotless Town," laughed Peter Hart. "It was all cleaned up by Lee's friends, the doctors, years ago."

Soon they were landing at the dock. Pilot Hart turned the wheel over to the ship's Captain. Natalie and Miss Lee gathered together their baggage and, saying farewell to their friends of shipboard days, walked down the gangplank.

The first lap of the great adventure was over.



Chapter XIV

THE THREE-RINGED CIRCUS

"We're all here but Young Peter," said a musical voice that sounded as if its owner had never been outside the state of North Carolina.

"Oh, Constance," cried Miss Lee. "How nice of you all to come to the dock to meet us! We saw Young Pete from afar some time ago." She hugged her sister-in-law, and, turning to the young Harts, called, "Hello, everybody. Here we are! Natalie, this is your hostess, Mrs. Hart, and most of the young Harts come down to welcome us."

"What a jolly looking family," thought Natalie, as she looked them over curiously, "and no wonder Miss Lee calls them stair steps."

"We are very glad to have you come to visit us, Miss Natalie," said Mrs. Hart, cordially.

"It is good of you to let me, Mrs. Hart," Natalie replied, in her best company voice.

Mr. Hart watched this polite interchange with a quizzical expression on his bronzed face. "Jiminy crickets," he cried, "but you are a formal pair! Why bless my soul, you'll give me a stiff neck. Will I have to wear my dress suit for breakfast? Come off it, you two. I've told Nats she is to call me Mr. Pete. Why not have her call you Mrs. Connie, so we'll all feel more natural?"

"Very well, Nats, that will be splendid," answered Mrs. Constance, smiling at Natalie. "But here, you must meet some of the younger members of the family. I can see you have become pretty well acquainted with their father! This is Leonora, named for your Miss Lee."

Natalie looked up into the blue eyes of a tall, slender girl, three years her senior. Her oval face was framed with soft brown hair. Although her greeting to Natalie was friendly, she looked worried and unhappy about something. Natalie wondered why this was when the rest of the family seemed in such high spirits. But she had no time to give much thought

to the matter, for Mrs. Constance was presenting the other children.

"Young Pete comes next, but as he is away, we will have to pass on to Constance, my namesake, or Young Connie as we all call her. Say hello to Natalie, darling." Young Connie was a fat, jolly little girl of eleven, who smiled gaily at Natalie and said, "We're going to show you all over Panama like a tourist."

Mr. Peter laughed. "No we aren't! Natalie is going to *see* Panama, not act like a tourist. Where ever did you get that notion?"

"Well, Young Pete said we were, Daddy," Connie protested. "He said we would tell her some tall tales to take back north."

"The rascal!" said Mr. Peter. "You watch out for that fellow, Nats, and don't swallow all he tells you."

Next came Sally-Lou, the prettiest little girl Natalie had ever seen. "Here's Shirley Temple," cried Mr. Peter, trying hard to repress his fatherly pride in this beautiful child of his.

"No it isn't, Cousin Natalie," lisped this delectable little creature. "It's Sally-Lou!"

Natalie could still remember from the long ago days of her own childhood how she had hated having strangers gush over her. But she could not resist this beautiful child.

"It's no wonder your father calls you Shirley Temple," she cried, stooping down to embrace the child.

Sally-Lou seemed quite accustomed to such treatment. "Do you want to kiss me?" she asked.

"You little monkey!" said Miss Lee. "That's enough from you. Where's Jack?"

"That's the question," said Mrs. Connie. "Where's Jack? I wonder how many times a day I ask that?"

The whole family laughed uproariously at this. Apparently it was a family joke. They separated instinctively to begin the search.

"You two girls stay here and mind your baggage," said Peter Hart to Natalie and Miss Lee. "I'm sorry, but you might as well get used to the fact, first as last, that the Hart family spends most of its time looking for Jack. It's a steady job for everyone in our household."

"Constance, you take the dock and Leonora the streets. Young Constance and I will take the boat. And, Sally-Lou, you stay on guard here and watch for Jackie. Remember he has never seen Natalie and won't remember Auntie Lee, because he was minus two when he last saw her."

"All right, Daddy, but hurry up quick," said Sally-Lou. "Lunch was ready before we left, you know, and I'm hungry."

"All right, beautiful," he answered.

"Jackie always gets lost," Sally-Lou informed Natalie, gravely, "but he doesn't stay lost."

So engrossed had Natalie been in meeting the

Hart family that she had paid little attention to the docks, swarming with strange people from all over the world. Now she looked about her eagerly.

"What a lot is going on here in spite of the heat!" she said.

"It's the harbor of our poem, Nats," Miss Lee answered, her eyes shining with joy at being home again. "See those crates and bags piled on the docks? No doubt they are filled with some of the things we read about, though probably nothing so romantic as gold moldores."

"Well, some of them are filled with coffee," said Natalie. "My nose knows that."

Sally-Lou was listening solemnly to this conversation.

"Don't you have coffee at the North Pole?" she asked.

"Goosie," answered Miss Lee, "Natalie and I have never been to the North Pole. Where did you get such an idea?"

"That's what Jackie said," she answered.

Just then a long clear whistle cut sharply through the clamor of the dock.

"That's the I-Spy whistle!" cried Sally-Lou.

"What's that?" Natalie asked.

"It means that Daddy has spied Jackie. Little rascal," she went on in an excellent imitation of her

mother's voice, "I wonder what he has been up to *this* time?"

Down the gangplank came Pilot Peter with a roly-poly little boy on his back.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, imitating a master of ceremonies, "we have with us today Christopher Columbus Balboa Lindbergh Byrd Jackie Hart, the greatest explorer of this or any age. And as a story teller not even Ananias himself could touch him!"

Miss Lee and Natalie laughed, but Sally-Lou said, very solemnly, "You shouldn't tell them stories, Daddy, just because they are strangers and don't know any better. This boy isn't who Daddy said at all, Auntie Lee. It's Jackie and he is only four and a half and I'm six!"

Miss Lee held out her arms and the sturdy little boy went into them, giving her a hug and a welcoming smile.

"Do you remember me, Jackie?" Miss Lee asked.

"Yes. And you, too," he said and turned his bright smile on Natalie.

"Come, come, you Blarney Stone!" cried Peter Hart. "You have never laid eyes on one of these ladies before in your life, and you couldn't possibly remember the other one."

"Yes, I do, Daddy," the little boy said positively. "I saw them in New York."

"Has Jackie ever been to New York?" asked Natalie, wonderingly.

"He's been to the moon to hear him tell it," said Mrs. Constance, who, with Leonora, had joined them by that time.

At that they all laughed but Jackie, who gazed solemnly at one after another. "Why, of course I've been to the moon," he said. "Peter drove me there Saturday in his car."

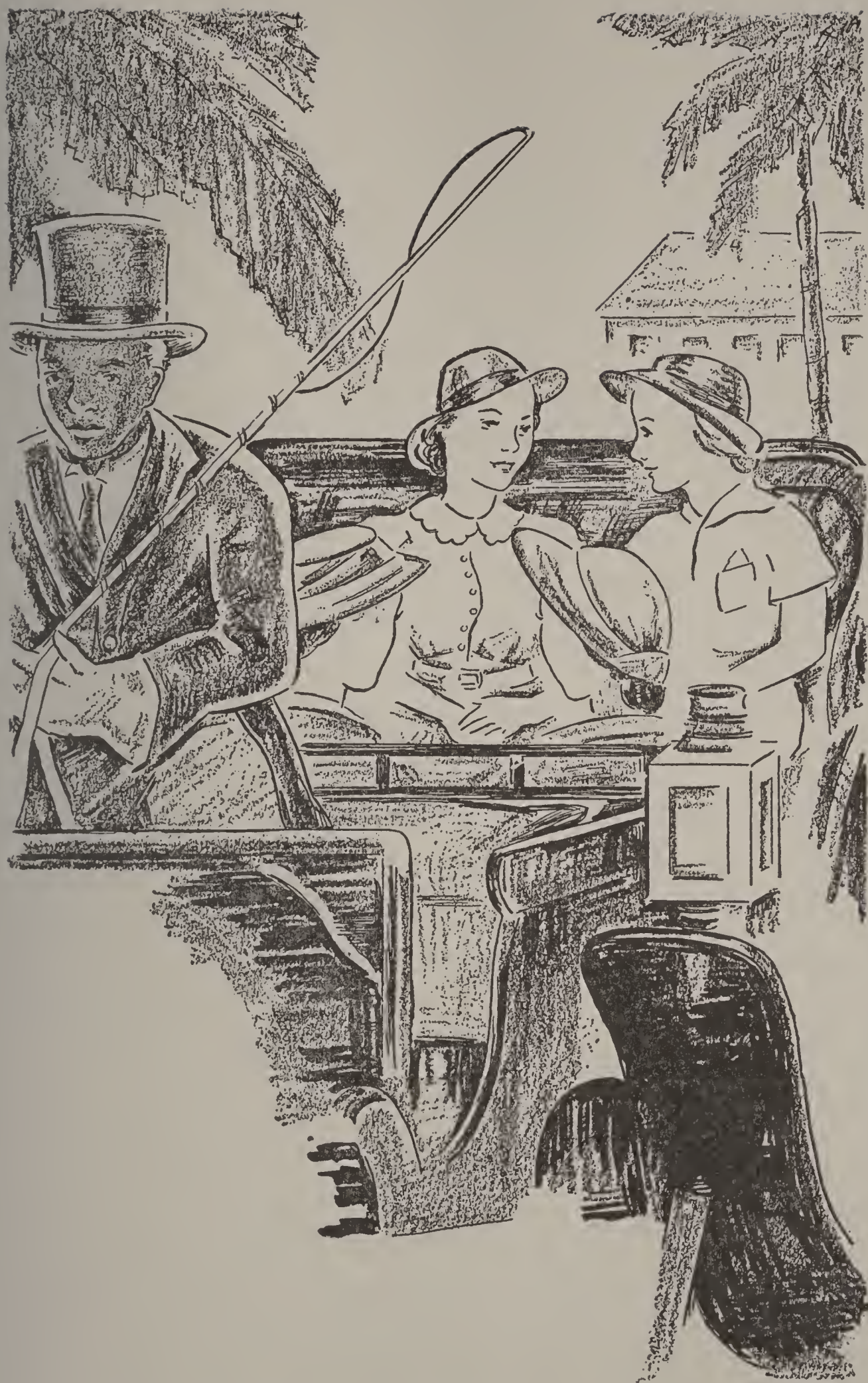
"Too bad Peter isn't here to drive us home to lunch," said Mr. Pete. "As it is, we'll dispose ourselves in a couple of taxis."

"Oh, no, Father," said Mrs. Constance. "Natalie must have her first ride in Panama in a *carimetta*."

"Right-o," he responded. "You all can have the local color and the kids and I will have the modern efficiency."

Mrs. Constance signaled to a sleepy-looking old colored man who was seated on the curb beside a rather rickety-looking carriage. He climbed upon the driver's seat with alacrity and, clucking to his horse, pulled up before his customers with a flourish.

"Why, it looks like the old-fashioned victorias they have in Central Park," said Natalie. "I always wanted to take one, but everything in New York is in such a hurry we never seemed to have time. This is fine," she said, settling herself. "With no top I can see everything!"



The carimetta jogged along a beautiful avenue

"We are lucky to find one here," said Miss Lee.

"Mother arranged to have this one come 'special-ly,'" explained Leonora. "They don't usually come into the Zone area, although we always take them to get about in Panama City."

Natalie smiled her appreciation. The horse was jogging along when they suddenly drew up sharp at a crossing. The driver spoke loudly to the pedestrians who were in his way, and rang a little bell to urge them to move on.

"How funny," said Natalie. "He rings a bell just the way a motorist toots a horn."

"You will get used to those," answered Mrs. Constance. "Everything that roams the streets, even some pedestrians, has a bell in Panama."

The *carimetta* jogged along a beautiful avenue lined with banyan trees. Flowers and shrubs were growing everywhere in park-like grounds on either side of the drive. But what impressed Natalie most was the neatness and cleanness of everything.

"It's so tidy!" she exclaimed. "It's as if everything had just been swept and washed and scrubbed."

"Now you know why they call it Spotless Town," said Miss Lee.

"I think Natalie should put up the sunshade, Mother," said Leonora thoughtfully. "This might be too much exposure, just at first."

"That's right, Nats," said Miss Lee. "Go slow!"

"Now where have I heard that before?" asked Natalie, with a giggle, as she obediently raised the sunshade.

"This is the first time in my life I have ever put up an umbrella except to keep off the rain," she went on. "It seems very queer."

"You'll be needing it for rain, too," said Leonora. "We have a shower regularly every afternoon, this season of the year."

"Isn't that obliging of the rain not to take you unawares?" Natalie chuckled.

They began to climb a hill through streets of feathery palm trees. Row upon row of trim little houses, each surrounded by large screened porches, were all about them. Bougainvillaea vines with huge reddish-purple flowers grew over many of the porches, and the gardens surrounding the porches were aflame with hibiscus and oleander. The lawns of these pretty little homes were as neat and well cared for as the public parks through which they had been driving.

"Many of the people who are connected with the Canal live here," explained Mrs. Constance, "and practically everyone in this neighborhood is employed by the United States Government in some capacity or other." Natalie had been noticing the spruce-looking officers going about the streets, looking very attractive in their white uniforms.

The driver pulled up in front of one of the little houses. "Here we are," said Mrs. Constance. "Welcome home!"

At first glance Natalie wondered how such a large family could possibly squeeze into so small a house, but as Mrs. Constance showed her around she saw how it was managed. In the back were two large wings, the boys' wing and the girls' wing, Mrs. Constance called them.

"We all sleep on the porches," she said, "and use these little cubbyholes for dressing rooms. This will be the room you will share with Sister Lee," indicating a very tiny but gay little room. "And you two, with Leonora and the two little girls, will sleep on this porch. I hope it doesn't seem too much like a dormitory to you."

"Oh, I think it's lovely," said Natalie. She was all eyes to observe everything in this strange new life. Somehow the place reminded her of the cabin at the camp which she and Daddy had decorated. Chintz curtains of a gay pattern hung at the windows. The furniture was wicker and easily moved about. "Perhaps it is because it feels like summer," Natalie thought to herself. "How different life must be when you can be out-of-doors all year long." She was finding it difficult to regard this house as the all-year home of a large family. It seemed different, indeed, from Harding Hall, which was so solid and secure.

"When you have tidied up a bit, come into lunch," said Mrs. Constance, after she had shown her guests their new quarters.

"And hurry up about it," begged Mr. Peter, who had come in with their luggage. "Woman," he said, eyeing his wife severely, "if you don't feed us pretty soon, I'm going to report you to the Governor for cruelty to children and dumb animals."

But Mr. Peter had to wait even longer for his lunch, for, as they sat down at the table, there was one place missing.

"Where's Jack?" asked Mrs. Constance.

"Didn't he come with you?" asked Mr. Peter.

"No, I thought he was with you."

"Dear, dear, what *shall* we do with that child!" said Sally-Lou with her usual mimicry of her mother's inflection.

"Well, my dears," said Mr. Peter in a tone of resignation, "you all enjoy your lunch and I'll go and fetch him. It's a sure thing that he is back at the dock watching the ship. He's a great hand for boats of all descriptions, that boy."

"Like his father before him," said Miss Lee. "Poor Peter, how I wish I could go for you! Hurry back!"

Mr. Peter returned in a surprisingly short time with a smiling Jackie in his arms. The little boy seemed quite oblivious to the fact that he had upset his father's lunch time or caused anyone the slightest

anxiety. Mr. Peter reported that he had found Jackie sitting on a bale of cochineal bark surrounded by a group of young Panamanians. He was telling them a story of his aunt and cousin who had arrived from the North Pole dressed in bear skins and driving sleighs hitched to reindeer.

"Did they believe him, Daddy?" young Connie wanted to know.

"Only the ones younger than eleven," answered her father, whereupon little Connie preened.

"Jackie and Sally-Lou insist on calling you our cousin, Natalie," explained Leonora. "I suppose because you came with our aunt."

"I wish I were your cousin," said Natalie.

"So do I!" chimed in young Connie.

"Why don't you be?" asked Sally-Lou. "Why don't you be our cousin?"

"She can't be," said Young Connie, with all the superior wisdom of her eleven years, "unless her father marries our aunt."

Everyone laughed as if that were a great joke. Everyone, that is, but Miss Lee. When Natalie looked at her, she was surprised to see that Miss Lee's face was quite flushed.

After lunch had been cleared away, the family lay down for their siesta. Natalie learned that it was the custom at the Isthmus to which most Americans adhered.

"It is well to stay out of the heat of the sun in the middle of the day," Miss Lee told her, "especially for people with white skins. The Indians and the colored folk don't mind it, and some white people who have to work in the noonday heat can get used to it, but it is inclined to make one listless. You'll like the custom, for it makes for a lovely long evening."

"The heat certainly hasn't suppressed the pep in the Hart family," said Natalie. "I hope I can keep up with them. They surely are a three-ringed circus, all right!"

"As the boys say, 'you ain't seen nothing yet.' Just wait until Young Pete comes home."

"I can well believe it from the sample I saw," said Natalie with a laugh. "You know, Miss Lee," she went on, "this siesta time when the house is quiet and there is nothing else to do anyway, would be a fine time for me to study the history course that I have to make up."

"Good idea," said Miss Lee. "We'll study it together and hear each other in our lessons."

Next evening, when Natalie and Leonora were returning from a walk, the most disreputable-looking car Natalie had ever seen drew up before the house, and the tall, blond boy who had waved at them from the boat of the hyacinth patrol climbed out.

"Hi, Pete," called Leonora. "Don't tell me the

Fallen Arch has made it again without collapsing! Come here and meet our guest from the north."

Young Peter Hart looked as nice on closer scrutiny as he had through the glasses. He gripped Natalie's hand in friendly fashion. "Natalie and I have already met long distance," he said, showing even white teeth in his wide grin.

At the sound of Peter's voice all the small Harts ran out of the house. Apparently big brother Peter was the favorite of the family.

That night the Hart family was jolly indeed. Young Peter told many stories of his adventures. Natalie was sometimes at a loss to know where truth was severed from fancy. Peter could not resist telling some extravagant tales to this greenhorn from the north, as Connie had prophesied. Even she, a most credulous young person, was better at detecting fact from fiction than Natalie.

Peter Senior was highly amused at his son's nonsense, but his mother protested after Natalie had listened, wide-eyed, to a fantastic tale of a parrot which had hypnotized a half dozen monkeys.

"See here, Peter," she protested, "that is pure plagiarism. Rudyard Kipling told a better story than that only he made it a cobra and not a parrot that did the hypnotizing."

"I thought that story had a vaguely familiar ring," said Natalie. "I'll watch my step when I listen to

your wild tales in the future. You're as bad as Jackie!"

"Well, here's a riddle for you then," said Pete. "You entered the Canal from the Atlantic side, didn't you, and traveled through it to the Pacific side. Right?"

"Right," Natalie agreed.

"Then, when you got to the Pacific side, were you east or west of the point where you started?"

"West, of course," Natalie answered promptly.

"Why?" asked Pete.

"Because the Pacific Ocean is west of the Atlantic. Everybody knows that!"

"Wrong again!" said Peter, laughing.

Natalie looked thoroughly confused. "He isn't teasing you this time, Nats," said Mr. Pete. "We really are twenty-seven miles farther east at this point than you were when you entered the Canal. See here," he went on, pointing to the map on the wall. "Everybody from up north assumes that the Canal runs east and west, when actually it runs almost north and south."

"Well, I'll have to take your word for it," Natalie answered reluctantly. "And this probably explains why I have felt turned around ever since I got here."

Almost as strange to Natalie as the country itself was this large noisy household. She had never lived in a large family before.

"It's more like Ward D than anything I've ever

experienced," she told Miss Lee. "Living with a lot of people all at once, I mean. But here they are all well and happy—and more interesting than I ever thought just one family could be."

"Do you find all of them happy, Natalie?" asked Miss Lee, who was worrying about her namesake.

"All but Leonora," answered Natalie, gravely. "Something seems to be troubling her. I guess perhaps I recognize the symptoms."

"Perhaps she will tell you what's the matter after you and she get to know one another better," said Miss Lee. "Then maybe you and I can help her."

"She should tell *you* her troubles," said Natalie. "You are the best person in the world for that, but I'd love to help her if I could. It would be a way of paying you back for all you've done for me."

"Silly girl!" said Miss Lee. "What are you talking about? I don't need you to pay me back. What an idea! You pay me, as you call it, with your love. That is all the payment I want."

Natalie put her head against Miss Lee's shoulder and sat quietly for a few minutes, thinking how much she and Miss Lee had gone through together. Suddenly a thought made her chuckle.

"Wasn't that funny, Miss Lee, what Connie said that first day?" she asked.

"What, dear?" Miss Lee tried to look innocent.

"About how I couldn't be her cousin unless you

married my father. Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Do you really mean that, Natalie?" asked Miss Lee in a very small voice.

"Mean it? I should rather say I do! Why, that would be the most wonderful thing in the world. Would you, Miss Lee?"

There was no answer, but Natalie felt Miss Lee's arm tighten around her. She said nothing more, nor did she ever mention Connie's remark again. But next day, when Natalie wrote her father, she drew a picture of the Hart luncheon table. There sat Connie, plump and smiling, and out of her mouth, cartoon fashion, came the remark about how to get Natalie for a cousin. Natalie made no other comment, but she had drawn the picture in colored crayons and had made Miss Lee with a very red face.





Chapter XV

GOLDEN DAYS IN PANAMA

Life was certainly full and exciting these days for Natalie. Here was a whole new family with whom to get acquainted and a whole new country to explore. A change indeed from the last few months at Harding Hall, and how it was agreeing with her! She and Miss Lee faithfully spent time each day on the massage and exercises prescribed by Uncle Bill, and she felt her muscles growing more limber day by day. One of these days, she determined, she would venture a set of tennis before going for her daily

plunge in the swimming pool in the grounds of the big hotel, which was just a comfortable walk from the Hart home.

Natalie was never too tired to walk down to the port with Miss Lee and watch the ships come through. Sometimes she and Leonora, with whom she had become great friends, wandered through the crooked streets of Panama City, visiting the shops filled with exotic goods from all over the world; listening to the foreign speech and savoring the foreign ways of the natives.

But sometimes, in the midst of their light-hearted chatter, Leonora would grow silent and preoccupied. Then all the sparkle would leave her charming face and her eyes would have a distant, far-away look. Try as she would, Natalie could never penetrate the older girl's reserve. She did so want to gain her confidence, to help in any way she could. For no one could have been kinder and more understanding of Natalie than Leonora had been, helping her with the first difficult adjustments to a large and noisy family, encouraging her in every way. So like Miss Lee, Natalie thought, in manner as well as name.

Once when Leonora seemed particularly sad, Natalie ventured to ask what was troubling her.

"You've suffered enough, Nats," Leonora had answered. "It isn't fair to dump my troubles on you. Besides, it really isn't anything—just my own fool-

ishness. I'm ashamed that I let you see that I'm blue." And she would say no more.

After that Leonora made a valiant effort to be gay and to join in Natalie's enthusiasm for all the strange new sights that so delighted her.

Whatever the excursion, Natalie always returned with many snapshots or sketches to add to her ever-growing collection. Her scrap book labeled For to Admire and For to See was to be her gift to Daddy upon her return to New York. She could think of no better way to share this wonderful trip with him.

Most of all she enjoyed the excursions exploring the nearby jungle, either on foot or in the disreputable *Fallen Arch* which was as Young Pete said, a seaworthy craft in spite of its appearance. The gorgeous jungle vegetation never failed to fascinate her. She wanted so much to try to put on paper its mystery and weird beauty, but although she bought water colors and tried hard, she was never satisfied with the results.

One day Pete took Natalie and Miss Lee on a trip to see Old Panama. The three tried to invest the ruins they were seeing with the feeling of romance which they felt should be there. But it was hard to find in these skeleton-like ruins any of the glamor of the days of old. Could these crumbling stones ever have been a treasure house for the fabulous riches

which the Spaniards had wrested from the Indians, who had in turn lost to Morgan's band of ruffians when they sacked the city?

Pete knew the locality well. Here, he said, was the bridge over which Morgan had led his men to sack the city. There was the old church, now little more than a memento of a long-dead city. Through tangled weeds and bushes they came to view the ancient treasury. Once, the gold and silver and precious stones looted from the Indians, had been stored here; then loaded on mule trains to cross the Gold Road to the ships waiting at Porto Bello to sail to far-away Spain. But now these empty cells were overgrown by the jungle, sending forth its great vines relentlessly to reclaim that land which man had wrested from her.

"What a story these walls could tell!" exclaimed Miss Lee. "What a terrible tale it would be, too. Sometimes we forget the cruelty of the pirates in our admiration for their enormous grit and courage."

"Oh, they were a destructive lot," said Pete. "I chalk up a lot of things against the pirates, but even more against the Spanish conquerors. That will surprise you maybe. But not only did those old demons steal the riches of the Indians, they destroyed the Indians, too. Why, they annihilated whole tribes in their everlasting greed for gold. It never occurred to them that these creatures, whom they regarded

as pagans to be killed or enslaved, had a culture and civilization of their own."

Natalie had never heard Young Peter talk like this and she was surprised at his intensity.

"Gosh, it makes me sore the way tourists act," he went on. "Not you, Nats. You're different. But most people think that Panama is just a short cut from one ocean to another. They just come down here and *oh* and *ah* about the Canal and never give a thought to the rest of the country. All they know about Panama is that there is a ditch here and all the natives sell Panama hats."

"Which aren't made in Panama either," said Natalie much to Pete's surprise.

"Now whoever told you that?" he wanted to know.

"A little bird named Lee," said Natalie with a giggle.

"Go on, Pete, with what you were telling us," said Miss Lee.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe you folks will think I am crazy. Only—well, Panama is so much more than just a pleasant place for tourists to visit. It's a wonderfully rich country and it's chock full of history, both known and unknown, with such enormous gaps in what is known. Maybe there are ways of filling them in. That's what the archeologists believe, Aunt Lee, and I mean to have a try at it myself. I've

traveled with parties 'way into the interior of Panama to places where only a *cayuca* can go; and found there practically unknown races that have lived untouched by the outside world for generations. Gee, I'm boring you, I am afraid, but now you see why I want to go up north to college—so that I can learn how to really study all this. It seems more important to me than anything else. I don't know why, but it does."

They were quiet as they drove back along the jungle road. Natalie was thinking that ambition was just as Pete said. It didn't have any rhyme or reason, but when it came it seemed more important than anything else. She felt that way more and more about her drawing, and she knew it was the same with Dick and his work, too. What was it Dick had said? Oh, yes, she remembered. It was the day after what they liked to call their great reconciliation, when he was showing her some paintings at the Modern Museum in New York. "I've got to do something more than just make funny little scratches on paper, Nats," he had said. "I've got to do something important like this."

She remembered how bright his eyes had been then, and how intense his voice. And here was Pete, looking and sounding the same way but about something quite different. It was ambition that made them seem alike at the moment, thought Natalie. What a

different Pete this was from the happy-go-lucky, teasing boy who made the Hart household such a lively one! She was glad she had had a glimpse of this Pete. She wished there were some way she could help him to the realization of his ambition!

Although Natalie thought she had been leading a very busy life, she was to learn that, according to Pete's standards, she had been sitting around in idleness twiddling her thumbs. She was quite shocked when she overheard him asking his aunt, one morning, if Natalie hadn't had enough rest now, so that she could begin to see something of Panama. Miss Lee laughed at that, and Pete said, "Why she hasn't done anything yet! I've just been giving her a chance to get used to the climate. Now, let's go places."

"All right, let's," said Natalie, who came to the breakfast table where this amazing conversation was going on.

"Hooray," shouted Pete. "All aboard for Taboga!"

"What is Taboga?" asked Natalie.

"Taboga," answered Pete, putting his hands to his mouth and adopting a tone which he fancied guides use, "is a small and prosperous island off the coast of the Republic of Panama, reached by gasoline launch, unless you happen to be either a whale or a pelican. Are you?"

"Why of course not, Peter," said Sally-Lou. "She's a girl."

"Excuse me," said Pete, grinning at Natalie. "Taboga, as I was saying, is kissed by the tropical sun, cooled by the tropical breeze. It's chief crops are fish, flowers and tourists. And its chief claim to fame is that it is the only place in Central America where Jackie Hart has ever been where he hasn't got lost."

"No doubt Jackie will do his very best to remedy that oversight," said Miss Lee.

"It sounds wonderful," said Natalie. "May we really go?"

"Why not?" said Mr. Peter. "I think it's a fine idea. It's Saturday so the kids have no school. I have no runs for the next two days, and I guess the house can take care of itself for once, eh, Mother? So let's make it a family party. You girls pack up a lunch. And Pete, after you have finished breakfast, run down in your handsome chariot and engage Josè to take us over in his launch."

"Oh," said Leonora, lowering her eyes. "I think I'd rather stay at home if you don't mind."

"Why, dear?" asked her mother, anxiously.

"I know, I know," said Connie. "She's waiting for a letter from Lieutenant Brady!"

"Hush, dear," said Mrs. Constance, frowning at Young Connie. Natalie and Miss Lee, seeing the blush on Leonora's cheeks, exchanged a quick glance. No wonder, thought Natalie, that Leonora had been

sad. She had been waiting for an all-important letter which did not come.

"Aw, cheer up, Leonora," said Young Pete. "The Fleet's due in a few days. The lad is on his way here. That's why he didn't bother to write. Thought he would surprise you."

"Hush, Pete. You all know too much." Leonora sounded provoked but her eyes were sparkling. Large families have their turbulent side, Natalie thought to herself. It must be dreadful to have one's inmost affairs discussed so publicly, but apparently Leonora was used to it, for she took it with very good grace.

"Is it really true, Dad?" she asked eagerly. "Have you heard?"

"Pete's right," said her father. "But how he heard it, I can't guess and won't ask. The Fleet's away ahead of schedule for some reason. We are to bring them through day after tomorrow. That will be a sight for you to see, by the way, Nats. Peter can take you to watch the ships go through the Miraflores Locks."

"Are they to be stationed here long, Dad?" asked Leonora, her voice a lilting song.

"Quite awhile from what I hear. But don't go prying into the affairs of the U.S. Navy, my girl, or I'm in Dutch," he said with a laugh.

"That means a round of parties and dances," said Mrs. Constance with a sigh. "We'll be very gay for awhile at least."

"If they come through Monday, the welcoming party will probably be the following Saturday night. And I have nothing to wear!" exclaimed Leonora.

Mr. Peter chuckled. "Now where have I heard that before? Be she a Park Avenue debutante, the Queen of Timbuctoo, or the daughter of a poor pilot, a lady will always remark, when confronted with a social event, 'I have nothing to wear!' Tell you what I'll do, Leonora. I'll lend you my dungarees."

"Well," said Leonora briskly. "Let's hurry up and pack our lunch. Run along, Pete, and collar Josè before anyone else discovers what a *wonderful, beautiful* day this is for a picnic."

Natalie had never seen so sudden and complete a change in another human being in her life. Leonora's listlessness vanished as if by magic. There was nothing forced about her gaiety now. And her energy matched even the strenuous Pete's.

Although every member of the household noticed and was delighted by Leonora's sudden right-about face, no one commented on it. Pete permitted himself one broad wink in the direction of Leonora's retreating back, as she hurried into the kitchen, but that was all.

Soon the family piled into a small gasoline launch piloted by Josè, a young Panamanian, and struck out across the blue Pacific to the small island just discernible in the distance. Young Peter, who had

seated himself beside Natalie, went on with his guide's chatter. Although his tone was as gay as before, he was telling her facts now, and Natalie was listening eagerly. For she found that knowing something in advance about what she was to see made everything so much more interesting.

"Taboga really is a treasure island," said Peter. "When word reached old Panama that Morgan, the pirate, was crossing the Isthmus, the monks took all the gold and silver crosses and goblets and such out of the churches, and put off to sea. They landed at Taboga and buried the treasure there."

"Have they dug up the silver and gold from Taboga yet, Pete?" asked Young Connie.

"Let's dig around and see," laughed Peter. "Tell you what I'll do, Connie, I promise to give you half of all I find."

"Thanks, Pete," said Connie, gravely. "And I'll give you half of mine."

"Pete, Pete, don't tease Connie so," chided Mrs. Constance. "I'm afraid we are several hundred years too late to find the buried treasure, Connie dear."

"Oh," said Connie, in a disappointed tone.

As they neared the island, Natalie saw the slender palm trees which lined the coast, swaying in the warm tropical breeze. The sea, a glorious aquamarine, broke softly against the white sand. "I just can't get used to all this beauty," she sighed happily.

Josè skillfully guided the launch into the harbor and they tied up against a small dock.

"While the rest of you go sight-seeing or swimming or whatever else you have in mind, Josè and I are going to do some fishing," announced Mr. Peter. "We'll meet here for lunch in three hours."

The youngest Harts were eager to get into the water, but Natalie begged them to stroll around the picturesque village before they had their plunge. She was getting a great deal of entertainment far away in this strange land out of everything alien to the life she knew.

"Okay," said young Pete, "I see you are armed to the teeth as usual with camera and sketching stuff."

"Let's climb the hill and see the view," said Natalie. "I just can't get over the color of the sea."

"And I want to see the flowers," said Miss Lee. "You youngsters can't imagine what these flowers mean to me. I can hardly ever afford to buy flowers in New York. Of course some gardens there are lovely too, but very different. To see orchids and jasmine and tuberose growing wild again is almost too lovely to bear!"

So they strolled around the little village, nestled in the grove of tamarinds, and Miss Lee and Natalie, much to the amusement of the children, exclaimed at the flowers which to the young Harts were as common as weeds.

But they could not long resist the lure of the beach. With one hand in Pete's and the other in Leonora's, Natalie jumped the breakers with the best of them. To see her now one would never guess that only a few months before she had been the little lame girl of Harding Hall.

"There's no tonic in the world like happiness, Constance," Miss Lee said to her sister-in-law. "Just look at that girl! How I wish her father could see her now!"

"And look at mine," said Mrs. Constance, happily. "Here I've been eating out my heart with worry over Leonora, and just see! One word that the Fleet is on its way here and she is as gay as a lark!"

"Who is this Lieutenant Brady?" asked Miss Lee.

"A nice, upstanding young American lad from Virginia," Mrs. Constance answered. "I knew Leonora liked him. He was most attentive when the Fleet was stationed here last. But I had no idea it went deeper than that until Connie upset the apple cart this morning."

"What a little chatterbox she is," Miss Lee said with a chuckle. "However, I must say Leonora took it very well. You have a very devoted family, haven't you, Constance? There's very little squabbling."

"Yes, I think I am lucky in my family. Of course we do tease one another sometimes, but never unkindly."

"That's why it is such a nice family to visit," said Natalie, who had left the young Harts in the water while she came up on the beach to rest. "I think I'll stay up here with you for awhile, if I may. I can't quite keep up with those strenuous Harts. But oh, it is such fun in the surf! No wonder Young Pete calls the hotel pool a glorified bath tub."

They made room for her under the awning that sheltered them from the burning sun and chuckled as they watched the antics of the children in the water. Young Pete with Sally-Lou clinging to his back, was swimming out beyond the breakers.

"How those two remind me of Pete Senior and myself," exclaimed Miss Lee. "That's the way he used to swim with me years ago."

Leonora and Connie were playing a game called *Where's Jackie?* One or the other of the girls would call out the question, thereby distracting Jackie's attention, whereupon the other would steal up and grab Jackie's foot, at which he squealed with delight.

"Leonora seems awfully happy at the news Pete gave her," said Natalie.

"Oh, we all have a good time when the Fleet is in," said Mrs. Constance. "Even old ladies like myself step out. The Zone is very lively with parties. And that reminds me. Leonora and I will have to do some dressmaking. In spite of her father's teasing her this morning, the dear girl does need a new party dress."

I hope we can make last year's over successfully."

"I've done that sort of thing all my life," said Miss Lee, "making over last year's clothes to fit this year's styles. Maybe I can help."

"I'm glad I brought my blue taffeta after all," thought Natalie. She smiled to herself as she remembered her vow made long ago when she packed that dress away *forever*—the vow that she would never again attend a dance as long as she lived. But that was a different Natalie Harding who had made that vow, Natalie mused, not the one who could jump in the surf, nor the one who had made a success of the Masquerade Dance on board ship.

And then a doubt crept into her mind. Was that dance on board ship such a success, after all? "If I seemed stiff and awkward then, they probably thought I was living up to my costume," her thoughts raced on, "and now I won't have any costume to cover me up! Oh, dear, what if—? I wish they would go without me, but of course I mustn't act like this." She began to reason with herself as she had done before the glass the night when she and Dick had had their famous battle. "Why, I'm getting more limber every day with all this good exercise and massage. Of course I am. I'll just go to the old dance and pretend everything is okay!" she decided resolutely. "But I do wish I could get in a little practice ahead of time!"

"Such is the life of a pilot's wife," Mrs. Constance was saying as Natalie came out of her reverie. "Sometimes the budget has a hard time accommodating extras. But we manage."

Natalie thought they managed very well. Their way of life was anything but elaborate, but the family was well and happy and the house comfortable. Mrs. Constance and Leonora did the housework, for after her graduation, Leonora had banished the maid so that the maid's wages could be saved to help send Young Pete to college.

"How long does it take an air mail letter to go to New York, Mrs. Constance?" asked Natalie, suddenly.

"About forty-eight hours."

Natalie said no more, but she was excited over a thought which had come to her as she listened to Mrs. Constance talk about the dresses. Now she knew how to use some of the money she had earned from Dick and in the way she most wanted to spend it. These people were so nice to her, especially Leonora, of whom she was so fond. She would get her Aunt Bess to buy a new dress for Leonora with her own money. But she would keep it a secret from everyone, even Miss Lee. No, she would take Young Pete into her confidence. He would be able to help.

"What's the joke, young lady?" asked Miss Lee.

"Why—ah—why," Natalie had never deceived

Miss Lee and she hated to begin now. To hide her embarrassment she dug into her bathing case and produced her ever-present pad and pencil.

“Just an idea for Minnie Mis-hap,” she said. “One of the cruise series. Looky, Miss Lee, do you think this one is good for a starter toward another fifty dollars?”

She flipped over a few pages of her notebook to a sketch of Minnie Mis-hap trying desperately to escape from a sinking ship by using a porpoise as a life-saver.

Miss Lee laughed. “That’s just like Minnie,” she said. “The right idea, but the wrong execution, as your father says.”

Mrs. Constance wanted to hear all about Minnie, so Miss Lee told her the long story, laying particular stress on the days following the accident, when Natalie’s skill and resourcefulness had helped save her father’s work.

“Those were awfully happy days, weren’t they, Miss Lee? Sometimes I think they were the best days of my life. If Daddy were only here, too, these would be the best.”

“Here comes Ike Walton,” said Miss Lee abruptly, as Mr. Peter came up the beach. “He looks as pleased as punch. Hi, Big Pete,” she called. “Has Panama been living up to its name?”

“What does that mean?” asked Natalie.

"Hush, don't let Young Pete hear you or he would be horrified at your northern ignorance. Panama means place of many fish."

Natalie, whose knowledge of fish was limited to the black bass and trout which she and her father caught at their camp, thought that most of these strange creatures belonged in an aquarium.

"Sometimes I feel like Alice in Wonderland down here," she confessed. "*Everything* is different. Even fish!"

Late in the evening they started for home. José's launch churned through the sea, leaving a path of jewels in its wake. The golden tropical night was all about them. While Jackie, who had not ruined Taboga's reputation about himself, slept peacefully in his mother's arms, and Sally-Lou tried valiantly to stay awake propped against her father's arm, the young people began to sing. Soon the others joined in as they sang the good old songs that every American knows and loves, *Old Folks at Home*, *Juanita*, and of course *Dixie*. José, his white teeth gleaming in the moonlight, kept time with his bare feet.

The beautiful harbor welcomed them back to the mainland. A tired, sleepy, but very happy family made its way home. But before they reached the house, Natalie drew Pete aside and whispered to him, "Will you run down town and mail a letter for me, air mail?"

"Sure, but no planes take off until Monday."

"Oh, dear," said Natalie, thinking that if this were the case, Aunt Bess could not possibly get the dress back in time for the welcoming dance.

"Well, if you're in such an all-fired hurry, what's the matter with a week-end cable?" asked Pete, proving that for all his interest in the past he was alive to the advantages of modern invention.

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea. Will you send it for me, Pete, right away? Here, lend me your pencil." She hurriedly wrote a message. "And here's some money. Can you read it?"

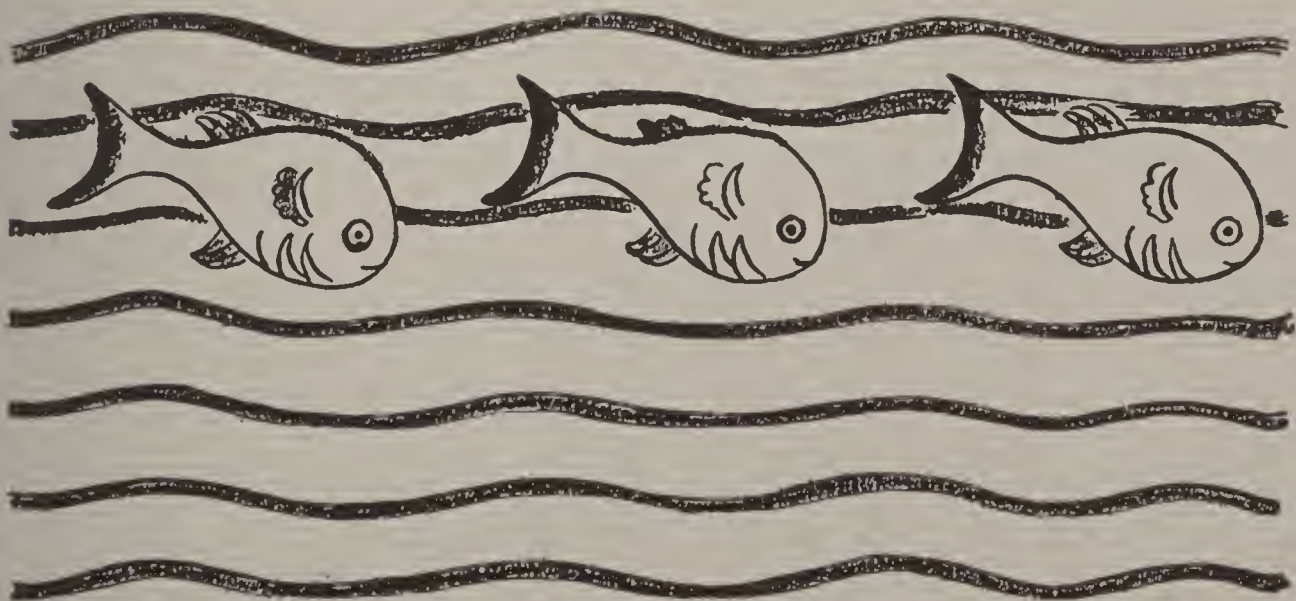
"Let's see:

MRS. WILLIAM RODGERS
—RIVERSIDE DRIVE
NEW YORK

PLEASE SEND AIR MAIL FOR SATURDAY NIGHT SILVER
OR ROSE EVENING GOWN, SIZE SIXTEEN, HEIGHT
FIVE FEET SIX MONEY FOLLOWS

NATS

"Yes," he said swallowing hard, "I can read it and I know who it's for, too. You're one swell kid, Nats!"





Chapter XVI

SPECIAL MESSENGER

Natalie was a little conscience-stricken as she saw how diligently Mrs. Constance and Miss Lee set to work to transform Leonora's party dress. But she dared not tell them of her cablegram to Aunt Bess. All sorts of things might happen to delay the arrival of the dress. Heavy weather might keep the plane grounded or, worse yet, it might crack up and spill its precious cargo into the sea! She confided her fears to Young Pete who did his best to reassure her.

"Don't worry so, Nats," he said, comfortingly.

“Let them fix up the old dress anyway. Maybe Leonora will need a second best.” And judging by the number of invitations that were coming in, Natalie agreed that Pete was probably right.

For the Canal Zone seemed to be on a glorious holiday. Ever since Natalie had watched the somber gray ships piloted through the locks she had felt the excitement and gaiety in the air. Everybody in the Zone was scurrying around busy with plans for dances and parties. The streets were full of sailor boys laughing and roistering, glad of a few hours respite from discipline. Less boisterous, but still very much enjoying shore leave, were the white-uniformed officers.

Lieutenant Bob Brady became an almost constant guest at the Hart household. He was a nice young chap and devoted to Leonora, although beside such a voluble young person as Pete, he seemed quiet indeed. For all that he carried the dignity of the United States Navy on his broad shoulders, he was not too proud to go riding around in the *Fallen Arch*. The four of them had lively times together. Lieutenant Brady escorted them all over the “tub”, as Young Pete disrespectfully called the very orderly gunboat on which Lieutenant Brady was an officer. Natalie remarked that it always surprised her to see how tidy men were on boats when they were often quite the opposite around the house.

"That's because we don't want to spoil you women," said Pete. "It would never do to let you find out that we can do the housework better than you can, or you would make us do it all the time."

"It's pretty lonesome on board ship with no ladies around," volunteered Lieutenant Brady grinning sheepishly at Leonora. "So we fill in our spare time cleaning house."

The excitement pervading the Canal Zone was running high in the Hart household and Natalie was carried along with the tide. Everyone was preparing for the Welcome Ball to be given the officers at the big club house.

"Don't forget, madam," Mr. Pete said sternly to his wife, "my duds and Young Pete's have to be prettied up, too." So Mrs. Constance sponged and pressed her husband's dress uniform and ordered a new white mess jacket for Young Pete.

"You mustn't tell anybody you are being escorted by a fellow who works on the hyacinth patrol," said Young Pete. "That isn't done by the socially élite in Panama, you know. I'll be about the only fellow there not in uniform. Sure you don't mind going with a chap in mufti?"

"Silly!" said Natalie. "I like mufti better any day."

"You probably won't have to see much of me anyway, so it won't matter," said Pete, "in case you are just being polite. When the sailor lads see a lass from

New York I might as well scram. Promise me the first dance though."

"Perhaps one will be enough," Natalie retorted.

Although she sounded flippant, Natalie was still apprehensive. She tried to recapture the mood of self-confidence she had gained at the Masquerade Dance on board ship, but no one could be hurt as badly as she had been at the Autumn Ball, without a lingering dread that she might again be a wall-flower. She vowed to herself that whatever happened, nothing like that should be repeated here. She would not let Young Pete get stuck with her and have to drag her around as poor Teddy had done. She would leave the place first!

"To tell you the truth," Pete was saying, "I bet one dance will be all you are willing to give me. I never was any Fred Astaire, and, since I haven't been on a dance floor for about a year, I'm as rusty as a horseshoe nail in an automobile plant."

"That makes it unanimous," said Miss Lee, who had overheard this conversation. "Let's persuade your mother to let us roll back the rugs tonight, Pete, and have a rehearsal to the radio. With Lieutenant Brady here, and the two Petes," she said, turning to Natalie, "we will be able to get quite a little practice. They can give us some tips on dancing à la Central America."

"Miss Lee to the rescue as usual," thought Natalie.

"That's a swell idea, Aunt Lee," said Young Pete when Miss Lee proposed the family dancing party at the supper table that night. "You two can teach us some of the latest New York wrinkles. We don't want you gals to find us behind the times down here. Come on, Mum," he said, offering his arm to his mother. "Let's shake a leg."

They had a jolly evening. It was especially happy for Natalie, for now she knew for certain that Leonora's dress was safely on the way. Just before supper Young Pete had surreptitiously handed her a cablegram from Aunt Bess:

FROCK ON WAY BY SPECIAL MESSENGER ARRIVES
FRIDAY EVENING LOVE

BESS

"I don't know what the special messenger means," Pete remarked, when Natalie gave him the cable to read. "Do you suppose your aunt is sending it down by her own delivery boy?"

Natalie wondered, too. Wondered and hoped that she had understood the message correctly. She got out her father's last letter and studied it carefully. In it he had thanked her for the funny sketch of one of the Hart luncheons which she had sent him some time before. "Was that a blush or sunburn on Miss Lee's face?" he asked. "If the first, I wonder why?"

And Natalie had answered, "Maybe she was wishing it were true, and so do I!"

The family dance was a huge success. After a few false starts, Natalie grew sure of herself and with each dance her confidence increased. If she could dance as well as this in the Hart's crowded living room, surely she would be all right on a ballroom floor! And certainly she had in the two Petes and the young lieutenant, a wide variety of styles of partners, each with a method all his own for her to follow.

"I got along all right, didn't I, Miss Lee?" Natalie asked that night as, weary but extremely happy, they prepared for bed. "All this exercise I have been taking, plus your wonderful massage, has done the trick."

"Plus something else, too," Miss Lee answered, as she kissed the girl good night. "A confident heart!"

Mr. Peter suggested that they have another practice dance on the following night. Mrs. Constance agreed, although she reminded them that they must all get to bed early in order to be extra fit for the great Ball the night after.

Again the reed rugs were rolled up and the radio turned on. Such joyful sounds issued from the household that a man with a long flat package in his hand, had a difficult time making himself heard over the uproar, as he pounded on the door.

Finally Young Connie called out, "Somebody's knocking at the door," and rushed out on the porch.

"Package for Miss Leonora Hart," said a voice.

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Connie, and hurried back into the room, unceremoniously leaving the messenger standing on the door step. "Leonora," she cried excitedly. "Here's a package for you!"

The dancing stopped as the family gathered around Leonora to see what was in the mysterious box. Leonora lifted the cover. Out came a beautiful rose evening gown with a little silver jacket. Every graceful fold proclaimed it chic New York.

"Oh, how wonderful, how beautiful!" cried Leonora. "Is it really for me?"

"That's what the man said," Connie told her. "And look, it's got your name on the box."

"Who could have sent it? Mummie you didn't, you mustn't," she said. Then she stopped, for she noticed how studiously unconcerned Natalie was looking. "Nats darling, is *this* what you did with your Minnie Mis-hap money?"

"Sure she did, dumbbell," said Young Pete, "and she has about pestered the life out of me for fear it wouldn't get here in time."

Leonora went over and put her arms around Natalie. "Nats, I think you're the nicest, most generous girl in the world!"

"Indeed she is," said Mrs. Constance, warmly. "But Natalie, dear, you really shouldn't have spent so much money. It worries me."

"Dad said I was to do whatever I wanted with it,"

said Natalie. "So please don't worry, Mrs. Constance."

"*That's* what you were planning on the beach at Taboga the other day, was it?" asked Miss Lee, smiling affectionately at Natalie.

"Why don't you go and try it on, Leonora?" suggested Mr. Peter.

The family sat waiting expectantly for Leonora to reappear. Now that they were quiet, they became aware of a persistent knocking at the front door.

"See who it is, Connie," said Mrs. Constance.

"It's the man who brought Leonora's dress," said Connie, coming back into the room. "He says please may he come in and join our dance and why don't we pay any attention to him?"

"A-ha!" cried Natalie, "I see it all now," and she rushed to the door. There was a glad little cry, a resounding kiss, and, before the startled eyes of Miss Lee, Natalie led Donald Harding into the room.

"Here's Leonora's special messenger!" cried Natalie.

"Oh, Donald," said Miss Lee. "How glad I am to see you!" If Natalie and her father needed further assurance they got it then. "Nats, you monkey, did you know it all the time?"

"Honestly I didn't," Natalie said. "Did I, Dad?"

"No, but you were responsible for putting ideas into my head—you and your pictures," her father

answered, whereat much to the perplexity of the others, they both laughed.

"But tell me, Dad," said Natalie, after the clamor of greetings and introductions was over. "How did you manage to come? Don't tell me you have sold Harding Hall again."

"Well, you see," said Donald Harding to the Harts in general, "ever since Natalie got here she has been singing the praises of the wonderful Hart family, and I wanted to meet you, too. But of course, as Natalie has just suggested, that seemed out of the question. So I decided that our firm ought to get the advertising contract for the steamship company that manages cruises to Panama, and so forth, and I went after 'em hammer and tongs. It's a joke on you, Nats. We are going to use your letter as a basis for a little leaflet for *Cruises for Juniors*.

"Well, I finally landed the contract with the steamship company, but then my troubles began in earnest, for I had an even harder time persuading my partners that I couldn't write authentic copy about Panama until I'd seen the place. They told me I could use Natalie's snapshots, the encyclopedia and my own imagination. And I didn't win out until I brought in another contract from the airways. Then they gave in with a vengeance, just in time, as you all see, for me to fly down to be messenger boy for Miss Leonora Hart, Jr." His eyes twinkled as he

looked at Leonora who, clad in her new finery had just come into the room. "Rather worth the trip, I'll say."

"And will you be here long, Daddy?" Natalie asked, when the family had praised Leonora's beautiful dress.

"It depends on how fast I can work," said her father. "I've got to produce some awfully good stuff to justify the expense of this trip in the eyes of the firm. All you Panama enthusiasts will have to help me."

"I hope it will take a long time, Daddy," said Natalie. "It will be wonderful having you here, too."

"Well, Leonora," said Mrs. Constance, briskly, "I think you and I should fix your special messenger a bite of supper, and I'm sure we would all like a cold drink. Take off your new dress and come along."

When Mrs. Constance and Leonora came back into the room with trays of good things to eat and drink, everyone forgot the resolve to go to bed early, so absorbed were they in getting acquainted with Natalie's father. They gave him the same hearty welcome they had given Natalie. It was easy to see, thought Donald Harding, why such a family had been the best possible tonic for Natalie, just as Miss Lee had predicted.

All but Jackie, who was safely asleep in bed, gathered around their new friend. Sally-Lou, who had

been allowed to skip her bedtime, took one look at him, and forthwith climbed up into his lap which she refused to leave. Plump little Connie sat on a cushion at his feet, hanging on his every word.

At last, putting sleepy little Sally-Lou into her mother's arms, he rose to go. "I've engaged a room at the Central," he said. "Can I get a taxi to take me there?"

"Let's drive him, Nats," suggested Young Pete. "Come along with us, Aunt Lee, won't you?"

"It really is a car, Daddy," said Natalie, seeing her father's quizzical expression as he surveyed the *Fallen Arch*.

"Nats is right, sir," said Young Pete. "It may look like the remains of a junk heap after an earthquake has struck it, but it is safe and speedy."

"I'll vouch for that," said Miss Lee.

"Very well," said Donald Harding as he climbed in. "I'll take your word for it, but please be careful. For if ever there was a night when I wanted the world to stand still safe and sound, this is it!"

"We will do better by you tomorrow night," said Young Pete. "Dad has engaged two cars and has planned that we are to arrive at the Club House in style."

And in style they went, and fittingly too, for they were a fine-looking party. Young Pete looked very handsome in his new white mess jacket, and Leonora

ravishingly lovely in her new dress. Lieutenant Brady beamed with pride as he led her into the ballroom.

"You're the prettiest girl here," he whispered to her.

"Thanks to Natalie," said Leonora.

"Oh, it isn't the dress," said Bob Brady, seriously. "You'd be pretty no matter what you wore. Now please save a few dances for me."

As for Natalie, she was much too excited to worry about being a wallflower. Clad in the blue taffeta dress that had once covered such an unhappy young heart, she was radiant. So it was that she seemed to everyone, as her doctor uncle had predicted, just what she was—a mighty attractive young lady. Judging by the number of times her partners felt peremptory taps on their shoulders, he had been quite correct in his diagnosis.

It was the first of a series of parties for the Fleet, and those in charge had determined that it be an especially fine one. The tropical night did its part, too. Dancing under the beautiful moonlit sky, Natalie was suddenly wafted back in memory to the little Ball at school. "I guess I was pretty silly," she said to herself. "Maybe it was just that I was afraid. And oh, how good Teddy was to me that night! Well, I'll make it up to him somehow, some day."

She was dancing with Young Pete at the moment. "Look here," he said in mock complaint, "I've been

chasing around for about an hour trying to dance with you. Drat the Navy! I'm going to keep you awhile this time."

But at once there was a tap on his shoulder and Natalie looked up into the eyes of her father.

"Everybody happy?" he asked, softly.

"Yay man, as Cindy used to say," she answered.

"There's someone over here who wants to see you, Nats. I hope she will always be happy, too."

"Miss Lee, Daddy?"

"Yes, dear. She says I am to get your consent before she gives me hers." Natalie's hand tightened on her father's arm as they waltzed away together to the terrace where Miss Lee waited.

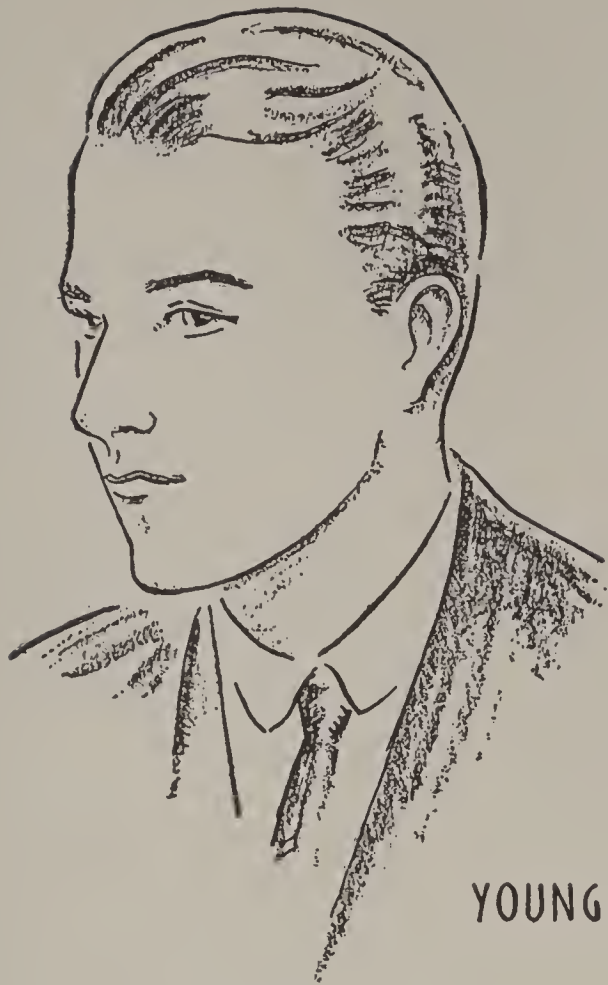
"Hello, Mother Lee," said Natalie without hesitation, and held out her arms. "It's swell!" she whispered. "It's simply swell!" And with another kiss to her lovely young mother-to-be, she went back into the ballroom.

"Cheerio!" cried the voice of Mr. Peter. "Whither away? My dance, if you please."

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered Natalie, happily. "Oh, Mr. Peter, Mr. Peter, let me whisper the news."

"Bless my soul alive!" said Mr. Peter. "Now isn't that scrumptious?"

"That sort of makes you my uncle," said Natalie. "Well, I've certainly acquired a large new family by coming to Panama!"



YOUNG PETE

Chapter XVII

FAMILY OF FOUR

And now Miss Lee had another Harding to whom she could show the wonders and beauties of the Isthmus of Panama. It meant a great deal to her to have Donald Harding on hand, to relive with him the memories of her childhood. And for Natalie of course, it made everything twice as delightful and as interesting with her father there to share it with her.

Natalie imparted information about Panama almost like a native daughter. She agreed with the Hart family that her father was to have a real knowledge of the country as a background for his advertising

copy. Mr. Peter of course, supplied detailed information about the Canal, and Pete the history of the Isthmus and something of the folklore of the natives. But it was Natalie and Miss Lee who kept impressing upon him the beauty of it all, especially of the jungle.

“Now we know what this lady used to rave to us about, don’t we, Nats,” said Donald Harding one day, when the three of them had returned from a favorite jungle walk. “And I know how it makes you feel too, Nats, about wanting to try to get it on paper. It makes even me have an itching in my fingers to hold a paint brush again. But only a great artist could get it. Not I, certainly, and we don’t know about you, yet, although we are certainly going to give you a chance to find out when we all get home again and you seriously take up your art study. I think Dick Frost is artist enough to do it. He has real talent, that boy. He took me to his studio and showed me some of his serious work shortly before I came away. I believe he is the real thing.”

“But weren’t you the real thing, Dad, before you hurt your hand?”

“No, honey. I had a flair, not a talent. It is easy to mistake one for the other. I could make amusing little drawings, but there was nothing great and enduring about them.”

“But Dad—” Natalie protested.

“Cheer up, darling,” her father said. “It’s a funny thing, but I really like being a first-rate business man better than I ever liked being a tenth-rate artist. For I believe I can get somewhere. Oh, it isn’t just the making of money,” he went on quickly, as he noticed the surprised looks on their faces. “We want to promote beautiful advertising, too. Just think, everybody in America sees advertisements all the time—in magazines, in papers and on billboards. Just imagine how beautiful the world would be if the best artists made those pictures, not only the artists that we know about, but some of the young eager ones who have no outlet for their good work.”

“You mean,” asked Miss Lee, “that advertisements would have really beautiful pictures, not the cheap, garish stuff we so often see?”

“That’s it!” Donald Harding answered.

“Then so-called commercial art can be as beautiful and fine a thing as what we now call fine art,” she said. “Why Donald, what a wonderful idea!”

“That is the sort of thing we have committed ourselves to,” he said. “And that is one of the reasons it has been such slow going. But things are looking up. These two travel contracts I am working on now have given us a great deal of hope for the future. It will take time and be hard work, but things that come too easily are never as much fun as those we work for, did you ever notice that, Nats?”

She nodded. "I like what you just said about beautiful advertising, Daddy," she said. "It makes me think of something Dick said to me once. We were in a museum looking at some pictures, and he said, 'I wish we could get this stuff out of here where everybody could see it. Art belongs to everybody!' If your plans come through it will be getting art out where everybody can see it, won't it, Daddy?"

"Yes dear, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if our Mister Dick will be one of the people who will help do it. Who knows, maybe you will be a candidate, too."

"Oh, do you really think so, Daddy?" asked Natalie, eagerly. "Do you think I have enough talent, not just a flair?"

"I don't know, dear, but I mean to find out. And, if so, I'll see to it that you have the best training that we can get you. Besides, we will see what they have to say about you at Art School next year."

"Art School?" asked Miss Lee. "That isn't going to cut out college for Nats, is it? Why not both—a course at Barnard, there in New York, with much emphasis on art and history, which seem to be the two things Nats cares most for. Isn't that better?"

"Well, I guess you are right," said Daddy. "Wise Lee! An anchor to windward, eh? Maybe we can tuck in a course at Art School, too."

They spent many happy hours making plans for the home they were to have in New York, for Donald Harding's firm had definitely decided that he was to be in charge of the New York office upon his return.

"It is what I have always dreamed about, Daddy," Natalie said to her father one time, "working with you in New York. And if I am ever a good enough artist to be admitted to your advertising group, that is just what it will be, won't it? I used to daydream about how we would be perched up in the clouds in a New York apartment with our easels before us, drawing away for dear life. But this will be better even than the dream." Suddenly she chuckled.

"What's the joke?" her father asked.

"Oh, I was just thinking, and it's not the first time either, how many swell things have happened to you and me because we had that awful accident."

Daddy laughed. "Makes us sound like a pair of Pollyannas to say it, but that was sort of a happy accident for both of us, at least in its results. Wasn't it? It stirred up nice things for a lot of people. However, let's not tempt fate by having another one. It mightn't work twice."

After Young Pete had given Natalie's father his oration on what was really worth while in Panama, and had proved his remarks by showing their guest from the States some of the lesser known places,

Donald Harding was completely converted to Pete's point of view.

"I'm going to take your advice, Pete," he said, "and give tourists something to think about besides the Canal. Not forgetting, of course," he went on with a bow to Mr. Peter, "what a marvelous piece of engineering it is. Maybe I can get the Republic of Panama interested in helping me get out some literature for tourists as Mexico has done. And Pete, if I have to go farther afield, I'll need a guide. Will you take the job? I don't know how much I can wrangle out of the company for expenses, but it will help swell your college fund somewhat."

Nothing could have pleased Pete more than such an opening. He took Donald Harding farther and farther afield, penetrating deeper into the jungle than ever Natalie had gone, visiting strange tribes and seeing many strange sights. The two became great friends, and the older man wished he might find some way to help the boy get the archeological training he so much wanted.

One day Donald Harding had a long talk with the Senior Harts, and, with their consent, he proposed to Pete that he should accompany the Harding family up north.

"There will be three of us by then, you know," he said happily. "And now that I am through with leg work and can stay put for a change, we can offer

Pete a home in our house while he takes a course at Columbia. I wish I could do more, but life isn't a story book. However, my brother-in-law, Bill Rodgers, has many connections among important people in the educational world. Perhaps he can arrange some kind of scholarship. At any rate, Pete will have plenty of time this spring to find out what is open for him, if he goes north when we do. What do you say, Pete?"

But Young Pete was too full of happiness and gratitude to trust himself to speak. He walked across the floor and awkwardly shook Donald Harding's hand.

"What do you say, Nats?" asked Miss Lee.

"I say it's swell," said Natalie. "And now I'll have a brother as well as a mother. We'll be the family of four!"

"You do have excellent ideas, my dear," said her father. "Look here, why don't we start now?"

"What do you mean, Donald?" asked Miss Lee.

"I mean that Panama would be a wonderful country for a wedding. I mean, why don't we get married now instead of waiting until we get back to New York?"

"How splendid!" cried Mrs. Connie. "Oh, do say yes, Lee. You can be married right here in your own home with your big brother Pete to give you away."

"And Leonora and me as bridesmaids," said Natalie.

"And me for best man," said Young Pete, "or won't I do?"

"Why not?" said Daddy. "And Mrs. Connie as matron of honor, and Young Connie and Sally-Lou as flower girls. Quite a family affair. Everybody accounted for but Jackie. What kind of job can we give him?"

"He can keep himself found," suggested Young Pete. "That's a man-sized job!"

"But, Aunt Lee," cried Leonora, "how about your trousseau?"

"I can wait and buy that in New York," said Miss Lee. "And suppose we have the ceremony in the evening. Then we can wear our party clothes as we did for the Welcome Ball."

And so it came about. It was, as Mr. Pete said, a hurry-up affair, but with so many willing helpers, it was all accomplished with dispatch.

A prettier wedding was never seen. The Hart's living room was decorated with gorgeous, fragrant tropical flowers. Young Pete had gone deep into the jungle for the rare and exquisite Holy Ghost flower for a special bridal bouquet for his much-loved aunt. Each member of the family played his role splendidly. Even Jackie was not remiss.

The girls looked their prettiest—thought Lieutenant Brady—especially one of them. As Leonora's eyes met those of the young officer they smiled a



A prettier wedding was never seen

promise that before long, this scene would be repeated for another Leonora Hart.

Natalie's eyes were shining as she watched her father place the ring on Miss Lee's hand, and heard his voice, vibrant and happy, while he said the words that changed their world.

"And now," she told herself, "now I have a mother." And her heart was full.

After the simple ceremony the whole party tramped to the big hotel for a wedding supper and one farewell dance under the tropical sky. For next day the little family of four was to embark for their new home in the great city up north.





Chapter XVIII

COMMENCEMENT

“Daddy,” said Natalie, “Do you know what day this is?”

The family of four was seated at breakfast one morning late in spring. A breeze from across the Hudson blew gently into the windows of the apartment where they were living together so happily.

“Let’s see,” answered her father. “It isn’t Christmas or Washington’s birthday, or—”

“Not even the Fourth of July,” put in Pete. “Any ideas, Aunt Lee?”

"Try Wednesday," suggested Miss Lee.

"I give up," said Daddy.

"Why I am surprised at you!" Natalie said. "Two years ago today a certain good ship Bobolink had a wreck, all but ruining her Captain and First Mate. And now look at us!"

"So it did, and here we are!" said her father, looking around the table with his most appreciative grin. "Quite a sizeable improvement, I'll say. And wouldn't you think it might have something to do with the fact that we took on a new pilot?" he asked with a bow to his bride.

"Not a doubt of it," said Natalie. "But I thought I'd just remind you. Come on, Pete. Walk down the Drive with me before you go grubbing around among the old bones in your Museum. Will you?"

"Sure," said Pete, "and if I could ever pry you away from Dick's Art School long enough I would show you that there is a lot in my museum besides bones."

"All right, Pete," Natalie answered. "I'll do it next term when I haven't anything else to do but go to college. Right now I'm too busy filling in the gaps, as Dick says, of a high school art course. And by the way," she went on, turning to her family, "I wrote Mr. Collins asking him to arrange for me to take that Modern History exam right away, so that I can present all my credentials to Barnard. They've

got to be sure I actually have graduated from high school before they will agree to let me in their sacred portals. Funny way to graduate, isn't it," there was a little note of longing in her voice, "by long distance via mail. Well, come on Pete, and so long, family. See you tonight." With a gay little laugh she tweaked her father's nose and placed a light kiss on Miss Lee's forehead. And keeping right on with their good-natured bickering, the two young people left the room.

At the corner Natalie paused for the briefest moment and looked back at the apartment. There was a small, happy smile upon her lips.

"Nats," said Pete, "maybe it's none of my butt-in, but I have never once walked out of that place with you that you haven't turned around and looked at it, just like that. How come?"

"Are you sure you won't think I'm silly?" asked Natalie.

"Of course not."

"Well, Pete, you've always had a family, so maybe you can't understand how I feel. You see, here I am, actually living in New York with a father and a mother and—" she broke off. "I still can't believe it's true. That's why I always turn around to be sure that building really is there, that I didn't make it all up!" Natalie's eyes were swimming.

"Funny kid," said Pete. "But I know how you

feel. It's sort of like that for me, too—being here where I've wanted to come for so long. I guess they are the tops, those two."

Unknown to Natalie and Pete Those Two were watching them from the window.

"It's almost too good to be true," said Natalie's father as he watched his daughter's brisk, swinging stride matching Pete's steps so easily. "Look at her, Lee. I can't quite take it in even yet," he went on, "nor this." His eyes roamed over their simple, tastefully furnished home.

"She is happy, isn't she?" asked Miss Lee.

"Happy! Why, she has come alive, thanks to you, my dear."

"But you know, Donald, what Natalie just said about graduating by long distance made me surer than ever that the child is longing to go back to Buffalo and receive her diploma properly with the rest of her class. It isn't the first time she has mentioned it. What do you think?"

"Why that could be easily arranged, I am sure," answered her husband, as they walked back to the table together. "One more cup of coffee and I'm off."

But suddenly he was struck with an idea. "Listen," he said, in his excited, boyish tone, "how's this for an idea? Call it a crazy whim if you like, but wouldn't it be fun to spend one last week in Harding Hall before they tear it down? All of us, I mean. The estate

agent has written me that he wants me to get all our things moved out by the middle of the month. Most of the stuff that's there should be thrown away, but maybe you and Bess might like to divide up the old furniture between you.

"Let's all move up for Commencement Week," he went on, his enthusiasm growing as he talked. "Then Nats could graduate from her old home while you and Bess and I, with Pete to help, cleaned out the place. Let's get Lucinda to come up from North Carolina to take care of us. I bet she'd come like a shot for nothing but her railway fare, just for the fun of it. It's a big job of sorting and storing which we have to do anyway, but combined with giving Nats a send-off it might be fun. What do you say?"

"You darling old romantic!" Miss Lee exclaimed. "I think it's a beautiful idea. You don't have to cover it up by pretending you are doing it chiefly for the sake of the moving. Let's make a houseparty of it and invite Dr. and Mrs. Bill and Cuz-zen Dick; and give Natalie a really lovely graduation."

"Then you think it would mean a great deal to her?"

"I am sure of it. And I think the idea of opening up her old home again is little short of an inspiration."

"Good. Suppose we make the houseparty end of it a surprise. I have to run up to Buffalo to sign the

last of the papers about the house anyway, and I'll take Pete along and make all arrangements. I'll plan the campaign with Mr. Collins so that that phase of it will be all right. And Nats need be none the wiser."

"That's fine," said Miss Lee. "Nats is due for a surprise of her own. She has planned so many for other people."

Donald Harding chuckled. "Well, I'll wire Lucinda at once and also propose the plan to Pete. I think he will like it, for it means he can see some more of the country."

And that is why, a few days later, Natalie received two invitations, one from the principal of the High School asking her to come back for the graduating exercises, and the other from Mrs. Davis, Teddy's mother, inviting her to visit them for the whole of Commencement Week.

"Mr. Collins suggests that I come up in time to take all the finals, Mother Lee," said Natalie, "as well as the Modern History exam. He says with my former good marks it might mean that I could get on the Honor List, if I get good marks on the exams, too. I wonder if I really do know enough to pass these exams after the lazy life I have been leading. It wouldn't be much of a joke to flunk them and bring down my average. Barnard wouldn't like that!"

"Not much danger of that, Nats," Miss Lee said.

"With a little study you can do it, I'm sure. And, judging from the very cordial tone of Mrs. Davis' letter, I think she would love having you for an additional week. See," she went on, picking up the note from Teddy's mother, "she says Commencement Week or longer if you care to stay. Why not write her frankly and ask her if it is convenient?"

"You and Dad will come up for graduation and the night of the Commencement Ball, won't you," asked Natalie. "Maybe Pete would come too. Do you think he would like to?"

"Yes, I am sure of it. You and I must see about some new clothes, though. What with the arrival of the Fleet and one thing or another, our party dresses got some pretty hard wear down in Panama, didn't they?"

"They certainly did," laughed Natalie. "All right, let's go shopping. There's one thing I'm sure of. At *this* school dance, whether the boys pay any attention to me or not, I'll have the youngest and prettiest mother there."

"You're a duck," said Miss Lee, giving Natalie a hug.

When Donald Harding and Pete returned from their trip it was hard to keep the plan a secret from Natalie. And it was with a sense of relief that her father put her on the train for Buffalo.

"Hang it all," he exclaimed later to Miss Lee and

Young Pete, "I can't dissemble worth two cents! If Nats had stayed around here another twenty-four hours, I'd have spilled the beans sure. I hope this won't make her lose her faith in me."

"Silly!" said his wife. "This is just the kind of surprise party Natalie adores. Look at the way she kept me in ignorance of your arrival in Panama."

"Well, she wasn't sure of it herself," answered Natalie's father.

"Don't forget Leonora's party dress," said Young Pete.

"You win," said Donald Harding.

"I hope this is going to be all right," he said later, when he and Miss Lee were alone. "Natalie left Buffalo under a cloud of unhappiness. Do you suppose she still has any fears about the place?"

"Oh, that's all over with, Donald. There's no need to worry about Natalie now, I am sure. As for this trip, it is just what she wants to prove to herself that she is all over the hurt of that year. I think she feels that Buffalo is something of a loose end which she wants to tie up before she can feel that she has really grown up. She told me before she left that she wants to make good on her own to prove to us that she was worth all the trouble we took for her."

"Worth it!" echoed Natalie's father. "The little goose! Does she think that we doubt that?"

If her father and Miss Lee could have looked into

Natalie's mind as the train sped across the miles to Buffalo they would have known how little need there was for worry. Armed with health and happiness she had courage enough for anything. Her one thought was to pass her examinations with flying colors. It would be no small feat to make the Honor List after all that had happened to her.

As for the Commencement Ball, it was doubtful if it would be a repetition of that dreadful Autumn Ball which had caused her so much pain. The memory of that ball was blotted out by another memory—of a ballroom under tropical skies and handsome young officers in gleaming white uniforms eager to have her for a partner. After all, when one has had the United States Navy to dance with, a few high school boys were nothing to fret about.

It was late afternoon when Natalie's train arrived in Buffalo. Mrs. Davis and Teddy were waiting at the station to meet her. "Oh, it's grand to see you two again," cried Natalie. "And Teddy, how tall you are. You look fine!"

"You look pretty hot yourself, Nats," Teddy answered, sheepishly, gazing admiringly at his old pal who was looking so well and pretty.

"Teddy is right, though not so very elegant in saying so, Natalie," said Mrs. Davis who was delighted at the change in the girl's appearance and manner. "You do look splendid. You must be sure to let Dr.

Burgess see you. He will be so pleased about you."

The car drew up before a pretty little cottage on a street far away from the old Block. "We've moved, you see," explained Mrs. Davis.

"Have they torn down the houses on the Block already?" asked Natalie in surprise. "Oh, I wanted to see our old house again before that happened."

Teddy was about to answer, but Mrs. Davis shot him a warning look. "Not yet," she answered. "One or two of the old families are still living there. But we moved some time ago when we had a chance to get this little place which is more our size."

"Well, I'd like to go over and look at the place some time before it is gone," said Natalie.

Poor Teddy was having a hard time keeping a straight face, but his mother jumped into the breach. "Let's wait until your examinations are over, Natalie, and we will all go over some afternoon. It will be like old times seeing you and Teddy playing around Harding Hall again."

Examination Week passed quickly. Natalie did a great deal of studying but she found the examinations surprisingly easy. Apparently her newly acquired ability to exercise her brains would always stand her in good stead. But would her name be inscribed upon the Honor List? She tried not to let herself count on it, but how she hoped!

Late Friday afternoon, when examinations were

over, Mrs. Davis suggested that the three of them go for their promised visit to the old Block so that Natalie could take one last look at Harding Hall. It was with mingled feelings that Natalie walked along the shaded sidewalk which led to her old house. She reminded herself of the apartment in New York and the jolly family of four. Nothing in the world could make her wish to change that. But the thought that the house would soon be gone gave her a wave of homesickness for the old days of Harding Hall.

She was very silent and her thoughts were deep. What was it she had once said to herself a long time ago—when new things came into one's life, some old things must go? Yes, that was it. But nothing that really mattered was going, just an old house, a shell of something. For had she not the best of the things that shell used to hold and more besides? Of course! Still, it would be fun to be back there again, just for a little while. Of course that was out of the question and it was silly for her to think of such an impossible daydream.

"Why the brown study, Natalie?" asked Mrs. Davis, noticing how quiet she was.

"Oh, it's nothing, Mrs. Davis, just a silly wish that I could go back and live in the old house for a little while with Daddy and Cindy and my nice new mother, before it's torn down and everything is changed."

This was too much for Teddy! He got red in the face and made a queer noise as if he wanted to laugh and cough and sneeze all at once and was trying to suppress all three.

"What's the matter, Teddy?" she asked, sounding very much like the Natalie Harding of the old Gang days. "Have you gone nuts?"

"Nothing is the matter," stammered the poor boy. "I—I just thought that was such a cuckoo idea!"

"Goodness!" cried Natalie, as they turned into the driveway of Harding Hall. "What in the world?"

No wonder she was surprised! She had thought she was to see Harding Hall standing deserted with shutters closed and barred, and—why, the house was alive! Windows were up and curtains were waving in the June breeze. The grass had been newly cut and the lawn sprinkled. And, unless she was stark, staring mad, she was hearing the voice of Big Black Glory raised in song!

"Whose beautiful idea was this?" she asked as she ran up the steps to the door standing hospitably open. Then she stopped and squealed with delight. Whoever had thought of this—pixies, brownies or Daddy—had overlooked nothing. Above the doorway was the old sign which she and Teddy had resurrected for the Tourist Home, but now it was turned over, showing the drawing she had made of Minnie Mishap for Aunt Bess' homecoming. Under the words

Welcome Home was printed in bright letters the single word—NATS.

She burst into the house like the little tomboy she used to be, all but bumping into two young men in their shirt sleeves who were decorating the entrance hall with boughs of dogwood.

“Hi!” called a familiar voice. “Why don’t you keep out until we get through with the finishing touches?”

“Dick and Pete!” she cried. “Fancy meeting you here!”

But she waited for no further word with them. She dashed out into the kitchen and was soon held tight in the arms of Big Black Glory.

“Cindy, darling!” cried Natalie, between laughter and tears. “Where did you come from?”

“Didn’t I always tell you, chile, that I’d come back when you sent for me? We-all’s goin’ to graduate you from your old home. Let me look at you. My, ain’t you pretty and handsome! Did you-all have a good time in that heathen place?”

“Heathen nothing, Cindy. It’s the loveliest place in the world. And no alligators bit me, either. Oh my, it’s good to see you! Where’s the rest of the family?”

“Here we are, darling,” she heard her father say. “Surprise. Surprise!”

Natalie turned around and there in the dining

room were all the dearest people in her world, Daddy and Mother Lee, Aunt Bess and Uncle Bill, Teddy and Dick and Pete. They all began to talk to her at once.

"I never guessed it," Natalie said. "I tried to come over here the first day I got back to Buffalo and Mrs. Davis persuaded me not to. Now I know why you were acting so crazy coming along today, Teddy. Good for you! I'll say you can keep a secret!"

"This is a farewell to Harding Hall," said her father with his arm around her. "We want the old place to go out in a blaze of glory."

There was a great deal to be done in the house in the few days before Commencement, for the accumulated treasures and possessions of many years had to be sorted and disposed of. But the evenings were devoted to fun, and the old house rang again with the sound of laughter and music.

Seated on the platform with her classmates, with Mr. Collins making the address to the students, Natalie felt very happy in a quiet, contented sort of way. High school days were over. She and all of them who had played together were young men and women now. Well, that was nothing to be sad about. It was, as Mr. Collins was saying, a commencement—a beginning, not an end. Natalie was sure that the new things—the things that were to be—would be even better than those they were leaving behind.

Now he was giving out the diplomas. She went up to receive hers, smiling down at the little group of her family, who with dear old Dr. Burgess, were seated in the front row of the auditorium.

Soon Mr. Collins would read the Honor List. She must not get her hopes up, she thought. After all she had been away so much, even though she had made such splendid marks during those lonely months when she had been such a grind. But wouldn't it be wonderful? How she wanted it for Daddy's sake, as well as her own!

Mr. Collins read several names. Then he said, "Natalie Harding."

Was she dreaming? She hesitated a moment, looking bewildered, so that there was a ripple of amusement from the audience. Then he spoke again with a kindly smile. "Yes, Natalie, I mean you."

When she came forward, "We are proud of you here at Buffalo High School, Natalie," he said, and for a moment, Natalie felt as if they were all alone in the room. Then he turned to the audience. "This young woman deserves the special commendation of all of us. She met with an accident so serious that it might have meant permanent disaster to a person of a less valiant spirit. But her courage and endurance carried her through. It gives me great pleasure to present you with this medal and to pronounce you fourth highest honor student in your class. I heartily



"We are proud of you, Natalie"

congratulate you, Natalie, on your success, not only as a student but as a human being."

There was a burst of applause which grew in volume as every pair of hands in the house joined in the clapping. Natalie turned shining eyes to the principal. "Thank you, Mr. Collins," she said quietly, as she took from his outstretched hand the medal she had so wanted.

Commencement Night! The same ballroom, the same people, but oh, what a different girl, thought Natalie.

"I guess it's the stag line for us, Pete," said Dick, pretending to be downcast, as the family drove to the hotel. "We won't get a look in."

"Remember, faint heart ne'er won fair lady," said Uncle Bill. "Go to it, boys."

What a ball it was! Natalie could scarcely believe it was happening to her. Everyone wanted her for a partner, from the captain of the football team down. Dick and Pete did their best to get in a few steps with her, but they had little luck. The old Gang claimed her for their own again. That is, all but two of them, Arthur Phillips and Teddy. She had seen her old enemy across the hall and waved to him. He gave a start of surprise and blushed as he returned her greeting. Apparently he did not dare come near her.

It was almost time to go in to supper before Arthur plucked up his courage to ask her to dance. And when

he did, stumbling all over himself in his confusion, she laughed inwardly, wondering how this gauche boy had ever had the power to hurt her so dreadfully.

"Will you go in to supper with me, Natalie?" he asked humbly.

"I'm sorry, Arthur," she answered, "but I've planned to go with someone else."

That was the extent of his apology and her pardon, but it was enough. Never again could that particular memory cause her unhappiness.

She was dancing with Dick when the announcement came that they were to go in to supper.

"What a break for me," said Dick. "I was afraid Pete would make it."

"I'm not going to supper with you, Dick," said Natalie.

"What!" he said indignantly. "Did I come all the way from New York to have my best girl turn me down when I want to take her in to supper?"

Natalie was tempted. There was no one in the world with whom she would rather go in to supper than Dick—no one in the world. But standing all alone was a boy who had stood by her, long ago, when all the rest of the Gang had turned their backs on her. She had promised herself that somehow, some day she would make it up to Teddy Davis. This was her chance!

"Got somebody else in mind?" asked Dick as she was silent.

"Uh huh."

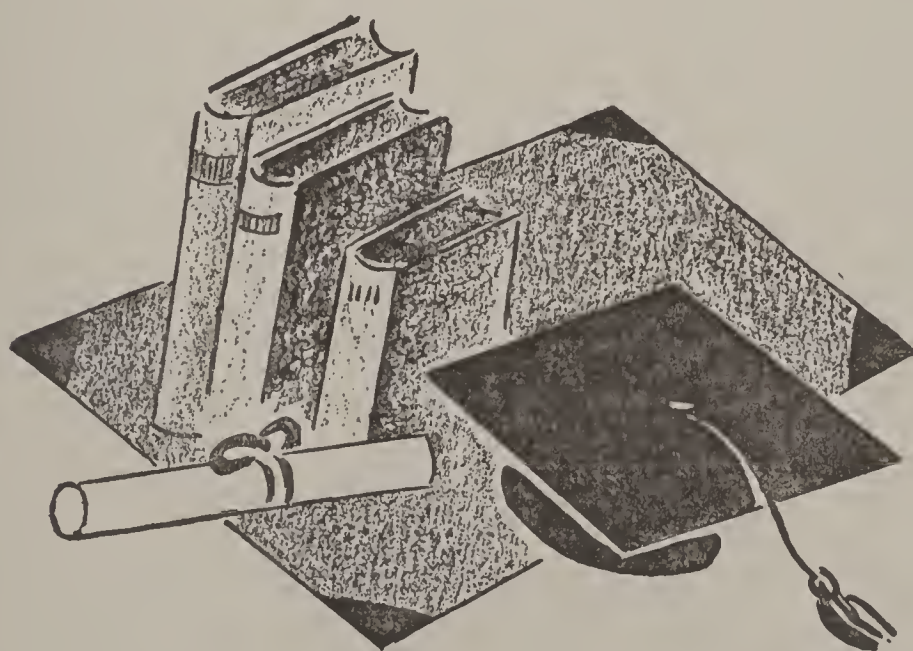
"Pete?"

"Heavens, no. Teddy."

"Oh, all right," said Dick, much relieved. "All right. That's different. Tell you what I'll do. I'll let you go tonight if you promise me a date for supper and a movie the day you get back to New York. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, Dick. Thanks." She left him quickly and went over to the corner where Teddy stood.

"Will you be my supper partner, Teddy?" she asked. And smiling happily, the two old friends went gaily in to supper.







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